DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 369 064 CS 011 682

AUTHOR	Chambers, Aidan
TITLE	Tell Me: Children, Reading & Talk.
INSTITUTION	Primary English Teaching Association, Newtown (Australia).
REPORT NO	ISBN-1-875622-09-8
PUB DATE	93
NOTE	130p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Primary English Teaching Association, Laura Street, Newtown, New South Wales 2042, Australia (PET045; $14 Australian members; $17 nonmembers plus $2.50 postage/handling).
PUB TYPE	Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC06 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Class Activities; *Classroom Communication; *Discussion (Teaching Technique); Educational Games; Foreign Countries; *Literature Appreciation; Primary Education; Questioning Techniques; Student Participation
IDENTIFIERS	*Collaborative Talk; *Response to Literature

ABSTRACT

A companion to "The Reading Environment," this book is concerned with getting groups of children to talk openly and confidently about their readings of particular books. Using a generous selection of transcripts of classroom discussions, the book shows how children can be encouraged to share their enthusiasms and difficulties and the connections they have discovered within and beyond the text, and thereby arrive at understandings which none of them could have managed on their own. The book explains the processes and outlines the rules of the "Tell Me" approach and provides a framework for the children's talk session. Chapters in the book are: (1) Introduction; (2) "Tell Me" Beginnings; (3) The Three Sharings; (4) Four Kinds of Saying; (5) Are Children Critics?; (6) Children Being Critics; (7) Honourably Reportable; (8) Why "Tell Me"?; (9) Meaning...?; (10) How Do You Know That?; (11) Selecting the Text; (12) Reading the Text; (13) Highlighting; (14) The Framework of "Tell Me" Questions; (15) Scenes from "Tell Me" in Action; and (16) "Tell Me" Games. (RS)

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AIDAN CHAMBERS

Tell me

Children, reading and talk

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TELL ME
Children, Reading & Talk

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Breaktime

Dance on My Grave

Now I Know

The Toll Bridge

Seal Secret

The Present Takers

(all Bodley Head)

Booktalk: Occasional Writing on Literature and Children

(Bodley Head; available Thimble Press)

The Reading Environment

(Thimble Press/PETA)

Tell Me

Children, Reading & Talk

AIDAN CHAMBERS

Primary English Teaching Association
in association with
The Thimble Press

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Tell Me was first issued by The Thimble Press,
publishers since 1970 of *Signal*,
the thrice-yearly journal devoted to books and reading
for children and young people,
and other writings on literature and literacy.
Some details of the text have been modified
for this PETA edition.

Cover design by Anne-Marie Rahilly

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Chambers, Aidan, 1934–
Tell me: children, reading & talk

Rev. ed.
Bibliography
Includes index

ISBN 1 875622 09 8

1. Reading (Primary). 2. Children – Books and reading.
I. Primary English Teaching Association (Australia). II. Title.

372.4

Copyright © 1993 Aidan Chambers
First published 1993 by The Thimble Press
Lockwood, Station Road, South Woodchester,
Stroud, Glos. GL5 5EQ

Australian edition first published 1994
by the Primary English Teaching Association
Laura Street, Newtown NSW 2042

Keyed at The Thimble Press
Typesetting by Avonset
Midsomer Norton, Bath
Printed by Ambassador Press
51 Good Street, Granville NSW 2142

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The goal is not to pack into our travelling bag only the best that has been thought and said but to find forms of critical talk that will improve the range or depth or precision of our appreciations . . . a kind of conversation that might *get somewhere* – not just a sharing of subjective opinions but a way of learning from one another . . .

Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep*

The written word can fall into the hands of any knave or fool. Only in certain kinds of personal converse can we thoroughly clarify each other's understanding.

Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*

A new description of reading could change what reading *is*; it should certainly change the way we look at it . . . Suppose we now began to speak of reading in terms of *dialogue* and *desire*; would that not be a better beginning?

Margaret Meek in *New Readings: Contributions to an Understanding of Literacy*

Some of the books discussed by children in transcripts quoted in the following pages are out of print and may not be easy to obtain. I have tried, therefore, to choose extracts which do not require a detailed knowledge of the book in order to understand what is being said and how the children are responding. The main point is to keep your eye on the kinds of things the children say and how the teacher deals with the talk.

1 · Introduction

Ours is a talkative age. Never before have people talked so much. The telephone, radio, cinema, television, audio and video recording have all increased our opportunities for speaking to one another, not only when we are together but across distance and across time as well. This has been a century of chatter.

At one time children were taught to be seen but not heard. Now adults are criticized for not listening enough to children, who are encouraged in school and out to speak their minds. These days we are all judged by how articulate we are – not that we necessarily talk any better or listen any more carefully than our predecessors did in less voluble times.

Tell Me is about helping children to talk well – and listen well – about books they have read. (What I mean by 'well' will become apparent, I hope, along the way.) And talk well not just about books but about any text from one-word signs to the writing we call literature, which is the kind of text I shall be concentrating on. *Tell Me* is a companion to *The Reading Environment* (PETA/Thimble, 1992), which is about how adults help children to enjoy books by providing the surroundings and organizing the activities that encourage children to read avidly and thoughtfully. Like its companion, it is intended for people who work with children and books, teachers especially: those who want to refresh and revise their practice, and those just starting out in their careers.

I am not interested here in talk for its own sake but in the part talk plays in the lives of discriminating, thoughtful, pleasure-taking readers. For I believe that reading *as a whole* (which means much more than the time spent passing our eyes over pages of print) – a far more productive, far more valuable activity than is talk for its own sake. However, I also believe that talk is essential in our lives, not least because most of us,

as the saying goes, do not know what we think till we hear what we say. Provided, that is, we know how to talk well rather than simply spilling out words in the kind of thoughtless blether that gets us nowhere.

Talking well about books is a high-value activity in itself. But talking well about books is also the best rehearsal there is for talking well about other things. So in helping children to talk about their reading, we help them to be articulate about the rest of their lives.

In a talkative age, what could be more useful?

Recently in Canada I visited a class of ten-year-olds who talked so well about their reading that an astonished visiting educator asked their teacher for her lesson notes. 'Well,' she replied, 'if you take me and all the books in our classroom, and let me do with your children what I've done with these over the last few months, you'll have my lesson notes.'

Teaching readers, whether children or adults, how to talk well isn't achieved in a few days; nor is it a programmatic business that can be expressed in mechanical one-two-three lesson notes that anyone can use successfully. Even writing about it at length is not satisfactory. The fact is we learn to talk well by doing it with people who already know how, just as we learn best the way to teach by working with an experienced teacher. As readers, as talkers, as teachers we are all apprentices. And as with all the executive arts based on craft skill, the only thing I can usefully do is to offer practical information, explain some of the processes and outline the ground rules developed by experienced practitioners. The rest (the art and essence) can only be learned by doing. There is no quick way, and there is no way but practice.

In my experience the best place to begin is with ourselves, as readers and as talkers. During the 1980s, when I was one of a small group of teachers who set out to improve our teaching of children as readers, we discovered how important talk is in that process. Out of this developed what has become known as the 'Tell me' approach. Please note: an approach – not a method, not a system, not a schematic programme. Not a rigid set of rules, but simply a way of asking particular

kinds of question which each of us can adapt to suit our personality and the needs of our students.

This short book has grown from that base, refined and expanded by further work done by myself and by other teachers who have reported their experiences to me – from those working in infant school, through primary and high school and college, to those tutoring postgrads and in-service teachers.

Like *The Reading Environment* (and other Thimble Press publications, such as Margaret Meek's *How Texts Teach What Readers Learn* and Liz Waterland's *Read With Me*), this book should be regarded as a workshop rather than an essay or a lecture. Of course all practical teaching needs to be carefully grounded in theory. The 'Tell me' approach grew out of the lessons learned from studying the phenomenology of reading (Wolfgang Iser helped us here), along with reader-response theory, the insights offered by feminist critics (especially what they say about cooperative discourse), and the writing of various thinkers, especially Roland Barthes, Jonathan Culler, Jerome Bruner, Margaret Meek, and Wayne C. Booth.

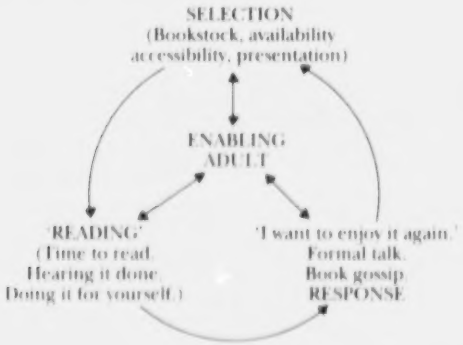
One more point by way of introduction. There is a correlation between the richness of the reading environment in which readers live and the richness of their talk about what they've read. Children who are surrounded by a well-displayed stock of appropriate and knowledgeably chosen books, who are read aloud to every day, who are expected to read for themselves just as often, and who are encouraged to gossip informally to each other and to their teachers about their reading, are well prepared to engage in the kind of formal talk we're thinking about here. Those not so well looked after are unlikely to respond as readily to the 'Tell me' approach.

I wrote about this in *The Reading Environment* and it is an essential part of the making of a reader. Any teacher who plunges headlong into 'Tell me' sessions, and finds things aren't going well, shouldn't blame the approach before considering the reading history and the reading environment of the students *and the teacher* involved.

2 · 'Tell me' Beginnings

Where does talk 'fit' into what some specialists call the 'reading process'? And what kind of talk do I mean?

Years ago I devised the diagram of 'The Reading Circle', which helps link each episode in the act of reading with the other parts in the drama. It looks like this:



The Reading Circle is a reminder, for example, that everything begins with selection – selection of a book to read is essential before 'reading' can begin; equally, selection of something to talk about is essential before any talk can begin. This is obvious; its importance will become clear. And I put quotation marks round the word 'read' because the Circle shows that 'reading' isn't concerned only with words on a page being scanned, but is a dramatic performance composed of many inter-related scenes. Helping children engage in the drama of reading, helping them become dramatist (rewriter of the text), director (interpreter of the text), actor (performer of the text), audience (actively responsive recipient of the text), even critic (commentator and explicator and scholarly student of the text), is how I

think of our work as teachers of reading.

The first drawing of the Circle did not include the elements of 'Formal talk' and 'Book gossip'. We hadn't realized then that these had a place. But over the years, as colleagues and I looked more and more closely at the Circle, we became aware that it was like a map drawn by people who thought the reading world was flat.

This is how we saw it: suppose a child selects a story by Enid Blyton (or any other very prolific writer who has produced all kinds of stories from the very simplest books for babies to novels aimed at adolescents), settles down and reads it, enjoys it so much that s/he finds another by the same author, reads it, finds another, and so on. According to our map we were observing a reader, someone many teachers would count a success. But of course we were uneasy. Exclusively repetitious reading of any one kind of book, of any one writer, is flat-earth reading. The reader may never know about (or, worse still, may not want to acknowledge) the world as round, plural, disparate, many-faceted.

Flat-earthers resist any invitation to explore beyond the boundaries of familiar territory because of the fearsome dangers they are sure lie in wait at the edge of their world. One of these dangers is called boredom. Another is called difficulty. A third is fear of exhaustion (perhaps the journey round the other side – if there is another side! – will never end). There are many other fears well known to enabling adults (my term for people – teachers, librarians, parents, writers and publishers, and the like – who help children become literary readers):

'I couldn't get past the first page/chapter.'
'It isn't my kind of book.'
'It looks too long. I'll never get through it.'
'I don't like the cover/title/author/blurb/hardbacks/paperbacks/print/paper/feel/smell.'
'There aren't any pictures./I don't like the pictures.'
'There're a lot of hard words.'
'I don't have time.'
Et cetera.

What is it that changes people from being flat-earthers into not just round-earth but intergalactic readers? How do we

turn a narrow-minded closed circle into an open-minded spiral that transports us into the multifarious universe of literature?

Our study group of six asked those questions of ourselves. We were fairly typical of the people we taught. We had all been brought up in conventional working-class and lower-middle-class homes. We had all attended neighbourhood schools, where we had met the variety of competence and incompetence always to be found in such places. Some of us were late developers as readers, others were avid devotees from infancy. Some of us had been flat-earthers and had changed. Were there any common denominators in our experience? Had anything particularly helped us? Indeed, were we open-minded readers ourselves? And what kept us spiralling now?

We quickly found some shared answers. As children we had all been affected, and still were, by what others whom we liked, respected, and would *listen to*, said about books they had read, and which we then read because of their encouragement. And we had all been affected, and still were, by what we *found ourselves saying* during everyday conversation about what we'd read.

It was in what other people told us about their reading, and what we told of our own, that we thought we had discovered the heart of the matter: a certain kind of booktalk gave us the information we needed, the energy, the impetus, the will to explore beyond our familiar boundaries. We could all recount memories of people who were particularly important in our lives for this reason, some of them teachers. We could all remember moments of booktalk that sent our reading another turn up the literary spiral.

Try asking the same questions of yourself and a group of trusted colleagues and see if your experience matches ours.

Quite obviously, however, not all talk – and not everybody's talk – works like that. What kinds of talk, and which special features in it, are affective?

We began to listen to people when they were gossiping about their reading. We examined theories of reading and reader response. And the more we studied, the more we became convinced of the essential part talk plays in even the

most sophisticated reader's reading life, never mind the centrally important part it plays in learning-children's lives. (Can you imagine any children becoming readers if no one ever said anything to them about all the books they could choose from, and all those marks on pages that they were trying to read?) This is what a colleague, Steve Bicknell, once wrote to me:

> At our last meeting you said, 'The act of reading lies in talking about what you have read.' Looking back through my notes of conversations I've participated in with children, I constantly return to a remark made by eight-year-old Sarah (not usually noted for her willingness to risk an opinion in front of her class): 'We don't know what we think about a book until we've talked about it.'

It was perhaps provocative rather than entirely accurate of me to locate the act of reading in the act of talking, but Sarah certainly spoke a truth we recognized.

If you eavesdrop on people's book gossip, you won't find their talk following a logical agenda, but if you analyse a transcript of it, the subject matter can be divided into three broad categories, which I call 'The Three Sharings'.

3 · The Three Sharings

Sharing enthusiasms

When friends start talking about a book, it's usually because one of them wants to share her enthusiasm. 'I've just read this amazing book,' she says. 'Have you read it?'

We all know the variations on that opening ploy, and how the conversation then continues. If others in the group haven't read the book, they want to know what it's about. But what does 'about' mean? Most people simply reply by describing the plot and the characters or the story's setting. What they don't talk about is significance. They tend to say something like: 'Oh, it's about these three older men who go off on a sailing trip leaving their families behind and then . . .' Much less often they say: 'It's a novel about family politics and the strains of family life in a post-feminist society.' That is, they do not summarize meaning as an academic critic would. Rather they tend to retell the story and talk about what they liked and didn't like – which might be anything from the nature of the story and characters and setting to the form, the way it is told.

If the others have read the book, the talk tends to slip at once into the kind of sharing that begins with such ploys as: 'Did you like the part where . . . ?' or 'Didn't you think it was very funny when . . . ?'

In everyday gossip, people seem to delay discussion of meaning (interpretation and significance) till they have heard what their friends have to say. In other words, the meaning of a story *for that group of readers* emerges from the conversation; it isn't set up at the start and then discussed, which is what often happens in formal academic booktalk.

These book-reading friends are sharing two kinds of enthusiasm:

– *likes*: enthusiasms about the elements in the story that have pleased and attracted, surprised and impressed them and made them want to go on reading;
– *dislikes*: aversions to elements of the story that displeased them, or put them off reading for one reason or another.

It is important to understand that readers are often as vehement about what they've disliked as about what they've liked. You see the effect of this in the gossip. If friends like the same things and find themselves in complete agreement, the gossip is often less interesting and ends sooner than if there are elements that inspire opposing responses.

Sharing puzzles (i.e. difficulties)

A reader will often express dislike for elements of the story that have puzzled him – things he has found difficult to understand. 'What did it mean when . . . ?' he'll say, or 'Did you understand the bit where . . . ?' Sometimes we hide our puzzlement in such comments as 'I didn't like the way the story ended, did you?' or 'I wasn't convinced by the teacher as a character, were you?' or 'What was it you liked so much about the scene where . . . ?'

One of the friends will try to provide an answer. (How this is done is considered below in 'Sharing connections'.) It is in this part of the talk that meaning is most obviously being negotiated and made. The friends discuss the puzzle and the suggested explanation, and out of this comes an understanding of (or an agreement to disagree on) what the text is 'about' – what it 'means' – to that group of readers at that time.

I say 'that group of readers at that time' because a different group of readers might well discover a different emphasis of meaning. As indeed might the same group if they had talked about the same book at a later date. The meanings of any text shift according to the context of the readers' own lives and their needs at a particular time.

If you doubt this, look, for instance, at the apparently simple word EXIT. In a cinema or restaurant or any other place where the word is used as a sign above a door, you would expect it to mean 'This is the way out' and wouldn't think twice about reading it like that if you wanted to leave.

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In an aeroplane at eight thousand metres, the word is used as a sign above doors and is illuminated all the time. But we know better than to use it, even if we feel very much like leaving the aircraft, because we know that, at that time and in that place, to do so means death.

If significant shifts in contextualized meaning can inhabit such an apparently simple word as this – a word we try to use as unambiguously as possible – how much more likely it is that a story using many words in deliberately ambiguous ways, as all stories do, will be laden with meanings whose potential becomes actual according to what different readers in different groups at different times and places discover together. Which is why we now accept that, as Frank Kermode wrote, 'the illusion of the single right reading is possible no longer'. In any text, no matter how simple, there is always the possibility of multiple meanings.

In sharing and solving difficulties over the puzzling elements of a story we may discover what that piece of writing means for each of us now.

Sharing connections (i.e. discovering patterns)

We solve puzzles, we resolve difficulty, by finding significant connections between one element in a text and another: elements, for example, of language, motifs, events, characters, symbols and so on.

Human beings cannot bear chaos, meaninglessness, confusion. We constantly look for connectedness, for patterns of relationship between one thing and another that make a meaning we can understand. And if we can't find a pattern, we tend to construct one out of the disparate odds and ends of raw material in front of us. We do this with everything in our lives, and we do it as we read.

We can only 'read' when we can recognize in the marks on the page the patterns called words and sentences. But learning to read stories isn't only a matter of learning to recognize these verbal patterns; it is also a matter of learning to recognize the formal, narrative patterns of the story itself.

Think of it like this: a building is made of bricks and stone and wood and steel, which we can identify when we see them. But these materials are used to create a pattern of shapes that make rooms of different kinds, and stairs and roofs and

windows and doors, which in turn create different kinds of building – a house, an office block, a factory, a school – which we also learn to identify from our experience of knowing how each is used. Texts are the same. They are built of different elements of language used in various ways to create different kinds of texts. We learn to look for details of design constructed in patterns that tell us what kind of building, what kind of story we have in front of us.

When the 'Tell me' approach is being used, children sometimes have trouble understanding what we mean by 'patterns'. Try drawing their attention to the story patterns in familiar folk tales (the three sons, the third one of which performs three tests in order to win the prize, for example; the repeated 'I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house down' in 'The Three Little Pigs'); the patterns of rhythm and rhyme in a limerick; and the visual patterns in illustrations and decoration that help us 'make sense' of a picture. They'll soon catch on and extend the range of their pattern-finding.

Not that all the significant connections come from the text itself. There are extra-textual connections that can be brought to the reader's aid. Two of these are important in booktalk and the making of meaning.

Critics call the first one *world-to-text*. This means comparing the events or characters or language of a story with events or people or language known personally to the reader. We bring our own world to the world of the text and by comparing them discover meanings in one or the other or in both.

In the same way readers sometimes *compare one text with another*. They describe how one book is like another or how it differs. Or they compare a character in one story with a character in another, understanding both a little better by thinking about their similarities and differences.

Both of these comparisons rely on *memory*: memory of our own lives, memory of other texts we've read. The play of memory provoked by a text is an integral part of the experience of reading and a source of its pleasure. Very often in ordinary book gossip all the talk will be concentrated on the memories the book has brought to mind.

These features in people's book gossip do not occur in any formal order. They are mixed up as the talk meanders about, apparently without conscious arrangement. In fact, the talk is guided by immediate need: the need to express satisfactions, or dissatisfactions, the need to articulate new thoughts in order to hear what they sound like, the need to 'bring out' aspects of our own lives that have been disturbed by the story so that we can externalize them – hold them up, so to speak, to look at them and thus gain some control over them. Like ordinary gossip, 'Tell me' booktalk is not orderly and linear, not what some specialists call 'totalizing discourse' – the sort of discussion that looks for specific answers to questions asked in a prescribable order, one question 'logically' following another.

In essence, talking about literature is a form of shared contemplation. Booktalk is a way of giving form to the thoughts and emotions stimulated by the book and by the meaning(s) we make together out of its text – the imaginatively controlled messages sent from the author that we interpret in whatever way we find useful or delightful.

4 · Four Kinds of Saying

Booktalk isn't just about one person communicating something straightforwardly to another. It is a more complicated and more communal activity than that. There are various motivations and various functions simultaneously at work. Much has been written about the role and practice of talk in learning. This is how one of the research-writers, Gordon Wells, expresses the central point:

> What seems to be important is that, to be most helpful, the child's experience of conversation should be in a one-to-one situation in which the adult is talking about matters that are of interest and concern to the child, such as what he or she is doing, has done, or plans to do, or about activities in which the child and adult engage together. The reason for this is the fact that, when both child and adult are engaged in a shared activity, the chances are maximised that they will be attending to the same objects and events and interpreting the situation in similar ways. This means they will each have the best chance of correctly interpreting what the other says and so of being able collaboratively to build up a shared structure of meaning about the topic that is the focus of their intersubjective attention. (*The Meaning Makers*, pages 44-5)

The 'Tell me' approach tries to build on this basic conversational mode, enlarging the partners from one-to-one, child-and-adult, to an enabling adult with a community of readers whose mutual interest is focused by a shared text. As an activity 'Tell me' booktalk is individual and at the same time communal and cooperative, for each participant must listen to what others have to say and take account of what everyone else thinks the text is about.

Every time we speak, we say something that we hear for

ourselves. I think of this as a private speech act. But, when we speak, we usually involve one or more others because we want to communicate something. I think of this as a public speech act. So talking is both private and public. Any analysis of this sort is of course artificial, academic. Talk doesn't feel like this in life. But, for teachers who try to help children talk well, it is useful to have some grasp of the intricate weaving of motivation and effect that provokes our speech and rewards our listening.

Saying for yourself

The private motivation for this speech act is the need to hear said what has been so far only inwardly thought, because, as is often repeated, 'we don't know what we think till we hear what we say'. Speech is part of our thought process, sometimes indicated by such remarks as 'I'm only thinking aloud' or 'Let me try this on you' or 'How does this sound?' Saying something out loud can tell us whether or not we know what we're thinking about.

But saying out loud usually involves a listener. And the involvement of others somehow alters our understanding of what we are saying and makes us think even harder about it. So the public motivation for 'thinking out loud' is not just to hear what we are thinking but also to help clarify what we mean in a way we cannot do on our own. However, the involvement of others engages a second kind of saying.

Saying to others

Whether we speak to clarify our own minds for ourselves, or in order to communicate our thoughts to another person (or, most likely, to do both at once), the saying of a thought to someone else means that the listener has to interpret what has been said. The listener reflects on it and reflects it back to the speaker. We see what we've said 'in a different light'.

Let me show this happening even in the writing of these paragraphs. In the first letter-to-colleagues version of this essay published in *Booktalk*, I called this section 'Levels of Saying' and under the subheading 'Saying for Others' wrote: 'the saying of a thought to someone else means that the listener has now thought it too . . . the public effect is to make our thoughts into corporately owned possessions' (page 142).

During a chance meeting Gordon Wells showed me how 'Levels of Saying' was misleading because it suggested that one level must be superior to another – and he was sure that I did not mean to imply this. He was right. None of what I now, as a result of Wells's comment, call the 'Kinds of Saying' is more important than the others. They are interrelated, not a hierarchy of less valuable rising to more.

As for the passage quoted, Gordon Wells later wrote to me:

> First, there is no guarantee that, by hearing what I say, the listener will think the same thought. In fact, it is highly unlikely that will be the case. What the listener has is an interpretation of the words s/he thought were spoken. However, this interpretation is coloured by: a) the listener's knowledge about, and attitude to, the topic under discussion (as would be his/her interpretation of a written text); b) his/her assessment, as a member of a particular speech community, of what would be an appropriate contribution for the speaker to make at this point in the discourse and, in particular, of what s/he thinks the speaker is trying to *do* by uttering these words with the observed paralinguistic and non-verbal behaviour; c) the degree of match between the speaker's and the listener's linguistic resources (dialect, vocabulary, etc.). With all the possibilities for less than perfect mapping between meaning intentions and observable communicative behaviour, it is highly unlikely that 'the listener has now thought it too' (where 'it' is understood as the very same thought).
>
> I have a further problem with the phrase 'corporately owned possessions'. The reification of thinking events into thoughts – objects that can be possessed or owned, and therefore also given or transmitted to others – really muddies the waters. What status is being ascribed to these things – thoughts? In what sense do they 'exist' outside the activity of thinking about some specific issue or problem? And in the course of the activity, what seems to be involved is an attempt at communication, either with a present or imagined listener, or with one's internalized 'generalized other' (Mead) in 'inner speech' (Vygotsky) . . . Thinking, then, is what you are describing in your

four levels [kinds] of saying, except that 'saying for yourself' doesn't [necessarily] involve the immediate presence of another person. What you describe with that phrase is the end of the continuum of 'saying for others' at which one is most tentative and exploratory, and probably least explicit. (from a letter dated 6 October 1992)

Gordon Wells pays me the compliment of taking what I wrote seriously, bringing his special knowledge to bear upon it, gives me his interpretation of what I'd written and reflects back to me what he thought I meant. Of course I at once wondered why I hadn't seen before something that now seems so obvious (and felt slightly foolish and dim-witted, as one does at such times). What characterizes the exchange on both sides is a desire to 'get it right', a determination to understand better and to say better what we thought I (we) knew: the making of meaning through a collaborative process of construction. This led to the following revision of the passage I'd previously written under this subheading:

In saying to others, then, the private motivation is the hope that they will interpret what we have said and help us understand it better. The public effect is that by pooling our thoughts we extend our individual ability to think. This is the basis of a think-tank.

Steve Bicknell provided an example of this second kind of saying from the early days of his work with the 'Tell me' approach in a lesson with some eight-year-olds.

We were talking about Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* and things weren't particularly interesting. Nobody had mentioned dreams or imagination; we were still busy with likes and dislikes. To move things on I asked them to tell me about what they didn't understand. Some immediately began comparing illustrations and saying that they couldn't understand how trees would grow in Max's room. I said, 'Yes, that's certainly a bit strange.' Wayne replied, 'He's having a dream.' Several 'Oh, yeah's' followed and some looked even more confused. I asked for a show of hands. 'Who agrees with Wayne?' The majority agreed and claimed they had always known it to be a dream! Wayne had actually, I think, enabled the others to

possess what he had said and, also, by saying it had made others convinced that they had already thought it.

Saying together

The private motivation here of joining in discussion is a conscious attempt to sort out with other people matters we recognize as too difficult and complex for anyone to sort out alone.

The public effect of this conscious pooling of thought is that we come to a 'reading' – a knowledge, understanding, appreciation – of a book that far exceeds what any one member of the group could have achieved alone. Each member knows some part of it, but no one knows it all. And the members of the 'community of readers' knowingly apply themselves to a cooperative act of discussion aimed at discovering more about the text than would otherwise be possible.

Saying the new

The private motivation here is the desire to engage in booktalk for the sake of the activity itself, because we have learned not only that 'saying together' produces a reading built of the segments of understanding we can offer individually, but also that the talk itself often generates new understandings, increased appreciations, that no one till then could have articulated. The sensation is of 'lift off', of flight into the hitherto unknown: the experience of revelation. By closely attending *together*, we are rewarded with riches of meaning in the text we did not know it offered before we first shared our individual understandings. Lissa Paul reports that her undergrads talk about the 'intellectual pleasure' they get from turning back to a text repeatedly in order to interpret it – and how much they enjoy discovering textual secrets. My own experience is that children obtain similar intellectual pleasure from this activity too.

The public effect of so productive an experience is that people come to know the social importance of literary reading. (Once known, never forgotten and ever after wished for.) They discover at first hand how reading – the whole experience of the 'reading circle' – transcends pastime entertainment, bedtime cosiness, or everyday functional

value: how, rather, it offers us images to think with and a means of creating and re-creating the very essence of our individual and corporate lives. (There are some who would say, complain even, that this is to invest literary discourse – reading and 'serious' talk about it – with a metaphysical, if not a religious significance. But then, I believe it has.)

When you think about these distinctions in relation to the practical business of teaching children to talk well about their reading, some questions immediately suggest themselves which you may want to discuss with your colleagues –

Saying for yourself. What kind of preparation helps us think about our reading? What questions can we ask each other that help release our thoughts rather than inhibiting them?

Saying to others. People may hear but this does not necessarily mean that they listen. Telling our thoughts is a waste of time if others don't wish to listen to what we're saying but only hear what they'd like us to say. What helps us listen attentively? What helps children make the move from egotistic speakers to cooperative listeners?

Saying together. Because we say and listen, does this mean we 'know'? Does understanding have to be articulated? Does cooperative talk help us say more than we thought we knew and, by hearing what others then say, make us aware of what we didn't know we knew?

In *Philosophy and the Young Child*, to which this writing owes a debt, Gareth B. Matthews tells an anecdote about a child edging up to this problem:

> Some question of fact arose between James and his father, and James said, 'I *know* it is!' His father replied, 'But perhaps you might be wrong!' Dennis [four years seven months] then joined in, saying, 'But if he knows, he can't be wrong! *Thinking*'s sometimes wrong, but *knowing*'s always right.' (page 27)

You may be 'right', but do you know what you've actually said? Because someone utters a critically incisive comment, does this mean s/he knows what s/he means? S/he senses it is right, intuition says s/he is, but is that enough? And even if

s/he is completely aware in her/his own mind of the implications of the statement, is this the case with all those who heard the statement, no matter how attentively they listened? What does the teacher do to consolidate *knowing* in both speaker and listeners? And how is this done without spoiling the pleasure of reading or the clarity of saying?

Saying the new. What does the teacher say or do when booktalk stimulates a 'new' thought? And how do we know a 'new' thought when we hear one? For we must remember that the 'newness' we have in mind relates to children's understanding, not our own (though the experience of every teacher who listens attentively to pupils is that they give the teacher new thoughts too).

All this may be true, but does reading literature and discussing it deserve so much attention during precious, time-short school days? At the end of *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, Jerome Bruner offers the hope that 'a new breed of developmental theory' will arise, the central technical concern of which

> will be how to create in the young an appreciation of the fact that many worlds are possible, that meaning and reality are created and not discovered, that negotiation is the art of constructing new meanings by which individuals can regulate their relations with each other. It will not, I think, be an image of human development that locates all of the sources of change inside the individual, the solo child. (page 149)

A few pages later Bruner shows us why literature and discourse about it lie at the heart of this development:

> I have tried to make the case that the function of literature as art is to open us to dilemmas, to the hypothetical, to the range of possible worlds that a text can refer to. I have used the term 'to subjunctivize,' to render the world less fixed, less banal, more susceptible to recreation. Literature subjunctivizes, makes strange, renders the obvious less so, the unknowable less so as well, matters of value more open to reason and intuition. Literature, in this spirit, is an instrument of freedom, lightness, imagination, and yes,

reason. It is our only hope against the long gray night . . .

What will see us through is the writing of poems and novels that help perpetually to recreate the world, and the writing of criticism and interpretation that celebrate the varied ways in which human beings search for meaning and for its incarnation in reality – or better, in such rich realities as we can create. (page 159)

The point I'd want to emphasize is the central place of talk in the critical activity Bruner describes. The kind of talk I am dealing with here has traditionally been called 'criticism'. Which causes sceptics to ask whether children can be critics.

5 · Are Children Critics?

When our study group asked teacher colleagues this question, the answer was often no. Criticism, we were assured, is an unnatural, specialist and adult activity for which you need training, as well as a perverse taste for pleasure-destroying analysis. Criticism, these teachers seemed to believe, deals in abstractions, in unfeeling intellectualism, calculating dissection. You can't 'do' criticism with children, they said, and if you try, you only put them off literature altogether. Many of them, it turned out, had been put off by what they thought of as criticism during secondary-school and tertiary literature courses.

We asked the question in the first place because our work had persuaded us that children possess an innate critical faculty. They instinctively question, report, compare and judge. Left to themselves, they make their opinions and feelings plain, and are interested in the feelings of their friends. When they talk about books, films, television, sport, or whatever own-time activities they share enthusiastically, they enjoy gathering information and are quite as discriminating as an adult connoisseur. No one, for example, is more critical than a nine-year-old football fan comparing notes about the previous night's game, or is more trenchant in defence of strongly held opinions.

If there is a deep interest in a subject, and the facilities are provided for its expression, children are, it seemed to us self-evident, natural critics from quite early ages (certainly by the time they start school at five years old). What our dissenting colleagues were talking about, we decided, was a warped notion of literary criticism based upon their own unhappy experiences.

What, then, was our view of literary criticism? What do critics do? And is that what children do or can be enabled to do?

It is difficult to persuade any academic literary critic to sum up briefly what criticism is. J.A. Cuddon's *Dictionary of Literary Terms* says: 'The art or science of literary criticism is devoted to the comparison and analysis, to the interpretation and evaluation of works of literature.' But so narrow a description would leave many contemporary critics greatly discomfited. What we all know, however, is that criticism has to do with meaning in texts, with 'making sense' of them – stating it, finding it, agreeing and disagreeing about it. Interpretation is part of what criticism is. So too is a consideration of how the meaning is made – by language, forms of narrative, conventions and ideologies – as well as what the reader does with the text and what the text does to the reader.

A simple truth underlies all this: criticism is autobiographical. Whatever the critic's particular bent or specialist preference – linguistic, structuralist, feminist, political, psychoanalytical, and so on – the basis is the reader's own experience of the text. Without that there is nothing. Nothing to work on, nothing of interest. So, as Jonathan Culler put it, 'To speak of the meaning of the work is to tell a story of reading' (*On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, page 35). To this extent, because it is concerned with the reader's 'story of a reading', reader-response theory is a good place to begin, for anyone interested in children and criticism.

When we asked 'What does a critic do?', we decided that W.H. Auden's essay 'Reading', in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*, was a sensible, down-to-earth basis for considering what children can or can't do. Auden wanted critics to:

1. Introduce me to authors or works of which I was hitherto unaware.
2. Convince me that I have undervalued an author or a work because I had not read them carefully enough.
3. Show me relations between works of different ages and cultures which I could never have seen for myself because I do not know enough and never shall.
4. Give a 'reading' of a work which increases my understanding of it.
5. Throw light upon the process of artistic 'Making'.
6. Throw light upon the relation of art to life, to science, economics, ethics, religion, etc.

6 · Children Being Critics

Can children – do children – tell 'the story of their reading'? Do they ever do what Auden wanted of a critic? We began listening more carefully to what children said and reading more carefully what they wrote about books. We soon realized how much we do *not* notice, especially when working with large classes. Often children express themselves in rapid cut-and-thrust talk and the teacher, concerned as much with keeping order and saying what she wants to say as with what the children are saying, misses the kernels of thought peppered through that conversation. Besides, a lot of the best things are said in private, outside formal class discussion. You have to eavesdrop as well.

Here are some examples of children behaving as critics, whether in a formal or informal setting, in speech or writing.

WILLIAM, aged ten, when asked if he didn't find Arthur Ransome's stories 'rather long and slow' (I meant boring), replied, 'Arthur Ransome is the sort of writer you enjoy most after you've finished him.'

This carries a number of possible meanings, all of them pertinent. William might be saying: when you are reading a richly made story, you experience the greatest pleasure only when you've finished and can view the whole pattern of the book and see how everything fits together. He might also be saying: all reading requires an expenditure of time and effort, energy and stamina; books like Arthur Ransome's, because they are long and detailed, take so much time and energy that for a while you wonder whether it's worth going on; but if you persist and reach the end, you feel all the greater enjoyment because of the satisfaction that comes from 'seeing it through'.

If William meant something like this, he was making a critically profound statement about reading itself, as well as

about the nature of Ransome's novels. Of course, he might have been making a joke like the one about banging your head against a brick wall – viz. Ransome's books are so tedious that the only pleasure comes when you stop reading. Which might be considered a critical comment of the same order as the others. As it is, we'll never know what he meant because I didn't ask him and, typically of a child, he didn't feel it necessary to explain. Had I overcome my surprise at such a sophisticated idea so succinctly put, what, if anything, should I have 'done' with it?

An aside about jokes: I've discovered, while working with the 'Tell me' approach, that nothing readers say during booktalk is wasted, least of all the jokes, which often take us to the heart of the matter quickly and surprisingly. If jokes are made, don't dismiss them; see where they lead.

HELEN, aged ten, when asked if she had found any 'boring bits' in my story, *The Present Takers*: 'I thought the first page and a half was boring and then I realized why it had to be.'

Helen's remark invites curiosity about what she meant, yet no one asked her, neither myself nor the nine or ten other children in the group. Could she have understood that her boredom precisely matches the passages in the book which establish the kind of story it is going to be and how it should be read? Had she understood that literary boredom can be a matter of confusion, a period during reading when the reader is coming to grips with the demands of unfamiliar writing (the patch in a book that some readers call 'difficult')? If so, she had performed an astute act of criticism. Could she have explained more about her boredom and revealed more about it to herself and the rest of us? Then she would have been doing what Auden wants a critic to do in his point 4 – giving a 'reading' which increases our understanding of the book. On the other hand, she might have been wanting the rest of us to show her what she meant. Or did she only discover that she 'knew' what she meant when she said that sentence aloud, and did she wish to make her meaning clear so that she could understand her own thought?

My guess, after hearing many such comments and trying to help children explore them, is that children often do want

to understand their own critical insights. What they expect the teacher to do is enable them to make the exploration. They expect her to help them articulate meaning, not by saying it for them, nor by explaining it to them, but by releasing their own ability to say it for themselves. Which begs one of the questions this book is set on at least partially answering: what does the teacher do that enables child readers to speak for themselves?

MARK, an eight-year-old whom someone had described as of 'very limited ability', after the teacher had asked if they could find any patterns in *The Owl Who Was Afraid of the Dark* by Jill Tomlinson: 'There is a pattern in the way Plop goes along the branch each time, then falls off each time, and then meets another person each time.'

Mark is playing a game of 'I Spy'. He is discovering more or less hidden connections between various elements in the story, and finds enjoyment in doing so. A great deal of critical activity, even the most sophisticated kind, is concerned with finding patterns – of language, of narrative 'codes', of plot, of images, of character, and the rest. Where we focus our attention – what we highlight – varies according to the nature of the story and the personal imperatives of any one reader's own reading of it. But all the time our experience shows that by finding patterns we make meaning, and that when we make meaning we are rewarded with a feeling of pleasure. Mark may be of 'very limited ability' and only eight, but he is observant and simply precise in saying what he has noticed. Whatever his limitations were assumed to be, they were no impediment to the exercise of his innate critical faculty, given two conditions:

First, a choice of book on which his abilities could operate. The language, pictures, content of the story, and its form – the way of telling the story – were all familiar to him.

Second, a skilled and practised companion to whom he could apprentice himself as a reader and a critic, one who enabled him to talk, and who knew how to help him focus his attention. Mark's companion was our colleague Barbara Raven, who translated an 'adult' act of structural analysis into a 'child-enticing' game of 'I Spy'.

SARAH, aged six, of *Railway Passage* by Charles Keeping: 'At the beginning some of the pictures are dull and at the end the pictures are coloured but one of the pictures isn't and that picture is one of Uncle Meanie and I think it is dark because it isn't happy.'

Sarah is learning to tell herself and her friends how stories work by looking at Keeping's subtly designed picture books, in which so many of the narrative codes are 'written' into the pictures. This way she is learning about literary complexity even before she can cope with linguistic complexity. And she is learning to do this with critical discrimination by saying what she has noticed, by listening to what others say, and by discussing their mutual observations.

I have not revealed what makes Sarah's saying even more striking. It was written. I have changed nothing except to provide capital letters for Uncle Meanie and an apostrophe for 'isn't'. Sarah would, however, have said what she had noticed to her teacher, Jill Hopes, and her classmates, before writing it down. And she had written what she wanted to say for a 'real purpose', not for the mere exercise of showing her teacher she could do it. All of this helped her sort out what she wanted to say and the best order of words to say it in before she tackled the task, difficult enough to require all her attention, of writing the words down. I was the 'real purpose' that provided the stimulus for such hard work. Sarah knew she was going to send her comments to an unknown adult, who had a genuine interest in her thoughts about Keeping's books. Sarah was one of the makers of *A Book All about Books*, which accompanied an audiotape of the children talking about their reading of *Charley, Charlotte and the Golden Canary*, of *Joseph's Yard* and other picture books by Charles Keeping.

'The lion in *The Crane* [by Reiner Zimnik] is the same as the black rabbit in *Watership Down* [by Richard Adams],' Anna Collins reported one of her ten-year-old boys saying in a somewhat startling (and accurate?) example of children making connections and comparisons.

In an article in *Signal* 26, 'Them's for the Infants, Miss', Elaine Moss provided further tape-recorded evidence from eight- to eleven-year-olds talking about *Come Away from the Water, Shirley* by John Burningham: they said it is 'Like *Peter*

Pan, Miss' – 'No, like *Captain Pugwash*'. She also related how there were some children

> *at every age* who did not manage to make the jump across the 'gutter' from left-hand pages where the parents sit, occasionally addressing the unseen Shirley, to the right-hand pages on which Shirley is seen synthesizing a real rowing boat and stray dog on the shore into the fabric of her vivid daydream . . . But far more children, again at all ages, did make the jump and were intrigued by the clues John Burningham laid for them. Although Shirley is not seen on the left-hand pages, 'She must have been there or her mum and dad wouldn't have kept talkin' to her, would they?'; 'Her body was there for them to tell not to do things, like "Don't play with that dog, you don't know where he's been", but her think was with the pirates.'
>
> (pages 68-9)

Shirley's body being there for her parents to order about but her 'think' being with the pirates is a precise account of the story and the formal arrangement of the pictures across each doublespread that controls the narrative. That this was understood by children of all primary school ages, and by the majority of them, further confirms our conviction that everyone is born with a critical faculty. Helping children learn how to use this faculty with consciously ordered attention is what teachers are for.

'Tell me' beginners

Here is an extract from a transcript of a young teacher, Susan Jayne Lamacq, at the beginning of her work (she was in her last year of undergraduate training at the time), learning how to use the 'Tell me' approach as she helps children talk about their reading, and discovering just how critically discerning their observations can be. The children are a mixed group, aged nine to eleven, in a small Oxfordshire primary school. When this passage was recorded, Susan had been working with the class for six weeks, during which she and the children had become more and more confident in their booktalk as they learned to trust each other and to accept that everything was 'honourably reportable' (see page 45 below). The picture book they are

discussing after a second reading is John Burningham's *Granpa*:

Teacher: Has anybody noticed anything they want to tell us?

Lee: At the end he [Granpa] has gone.

Bryan: Maybe he's gone to Africa without her.

Gwilym: She [the unnamed little girl] asks if worms go to heaven, she knows people do.

Candy: Definitely.

Jessica: He is gradually getting older and then he is very ill, then he dies.

Teacher: Yes, I noticed that. Did anyone else?

Gwilym: It starts off as spring and goes all the way through.

Teacher: Yes, starts in spring, through summer, autumn, and ends in winter. What do you think spring is like?

Stuart: Growth, new life, cows have calves.

Teacher: Brilliant!

Gwilym: The beginning of life for many animals.

Teacher: And perhaps the beginning of life or youth for people too?

Claire: The carriage at the end is pushed by an angel.

Stuart: No, it's the little girl after . . .

Teacher: This page [the last picture in the book] causes a lot of discussion. People don't know what to make of it.

Gwilym: She has grown up, she has learned to play on her own and be independent. In every other picture she is playing or doing something with Granpa, in this case she's alone.

Teacher: Perhaps life goes on. Do you think Granpa has died?

Lee: He has got his medicine out on the table and then next page it is gone.

Teacher: What do you think of that part? All the signs are he has got a cold – that's Vaseline, a thermometer.

Stuart: It's getting cold in the winter, perhaps he catches pneumonia – and died. And they have been playing in the snow.

Catherine: He could be in hospital.

Stuart: She looks very sad, because his chair is empty.

Catherine: I don't like to think of such a lovely character dying. I don't like to read books where he dies so in my mind I tell myself a different story.

Teacher: Do you like the book?

Martin: I like 'worms go to heaven'. It's thoughtful.

Lee: I like 'can we stay here forever?' That's what I used to say at the beach.
(Disturbance.)

Teacher: What do you think the book is about?

Candy: I think it's about a child's relationship with her grandfather. I think it's a very good book – if that's what it's about. It's very truthful from a child's point of view. But it's also about death, and children need that.

Stuart: How people get old, about life.

Teacher: Yes, definitely, that's very good. I think that too. What would you tell a friend about it? What about the language in the book?

Candy: It's very clever. It's just how children say things and what children do.

Jessica: It's sad – it sounds boring – you have to read it, then you realize and think it's great.

Teacher: Do the pictures add meaning to the story?

Candy: Yes. For example, the [empty] chair is most important. That is what the story is about really. It's the pictures that tell you what they are doing and where they are and sometimes other things like Granpa's old games, and the words just tell you a tiny bit of what else is going on.

(from an unpublished dissertation, 'Working with John Burningham' by Susan Jayne Lamacq, 1990, in the library of Westminster College, Oxford, pages 80-1)

You'll agree, I think, that these children are behaving, or learning to behave, as critics of the kind Auden wanted.

In preparation for the coming chapters, please review the extract, telling yourself what the young teacher did well and

how she might have improved her part in the conversation. Did her questions lead the children the way she wanted them to go? Did they suggest the answers she wanted? Or did she enable the children to say what they wanted to say? Does she miss opportunities to help children express their thoughts?

For example, take the moment when she asks, 'What would you tell a friend about it? What about the language in the book?' Might it have been better to separate two such large questions, giving the children a chance to answer one at a time, or was she leaving options open, implying that the children might actually prefer to talk about something they thought of greater importance? (Of course, the teacher's meaning would depend a lot on her tone of voice, and the paralinguistic and non-verbal behaviour Gordon Wells mentioned earlier. Transcripts can't communicate these, which is why learning to teach from the printed word is so inadequate and why working as an apprentice is so important.)

Some conclusions

I could go on giving examples, building up evidence in support of the view that all children are (or can be) critics, at least within the bounds set by Auden, but it would be better to review his six points and draw some provisional conclusions.

1. There is no doubt that children introduce each other to unfamiliar authors. Anyone who has observed children browsing through a wide selection of books knows this. And we also know that children introduce adults to authors too.

2. All of us in our study group had experienced occasions when some children convinced others that they had undervalued a book. By chance on the very evening when we discussed this point, Anna Collins handed me some writing by her nine- and ten-year-olds after a discussion of *Sun Horse, Moon Horse* by Rosemary Sutcliff. 'I didn't really like the book or understand it until we had our talk. It made me understand a lot more,' one girl wrote, as if in answer to our question. 'I think,' wrote another, 'all the comments the people made made the story come alive for me, because I didn't get it at first.' And, as before, we adults found ourselves remembering when our own opinions were revised by children's comments.

3. At first we were tentative about whether children could show each other 'relations between different ages and cultures'. Certainly, it is usually adults who do this for children, because they know more. But was this simply because they don't ever suggest children do this for themselves? The question 'What should the teacher do?' raised itself again, as it did frequently during our study.

Margaret Mallett has shown just how effectively mid-primary-aged children can cooperate in research into topics raised by their responses to a novel – in this case information about pigs starting from their reading of *The Sheep-Pig* by Dick King-Smith. (See 'How Long Does a Pig Live? Learning Together from Story and Non-Story Genres', in *New Readings*, ed. Kimberley, Meek & Miller, pages 173-82.)

4. This relates to (2), and we had plenty of evidence to show that children give 'readings' which increase their own, and our adult, understanding of books.

5. Asking ourselves why it is always the adult who 'throws light on artistic "Making" ' for children, we could see no reason why, sometimes at least, children should not explore this for themselves in the work of writers who particularly interest them.

For my part, having often visited classrooms as an author, I can testify to the keen interest children show in how a book was 'made', using working papers from first tentative idea to finished volume. Frequently, in return, they tell me about their experience of writing, comparing it with mine. That they can throw light on the process to their own benefit I personally have no doubt. It is all – again – a question of what the teacher asks of the children and how various is their own experience of different forms of writing.

6. Here is six-year-old Paula throwing light on 'the relation of art to life' as she brings her world to the text of Charles Keeping's *Charley, Charlotte and the Golden Canary*, in a piece of writing from *A Book All about Books* referred to earlier, and this time in an unedited quotation:

> Charley and Charlotte were good friends and they played together by the bird stall I was sad when Charlotte went to the high block of flats and Charlottes mother no longer let

> Charlotte play I like playing with my friends and when I can't I feel upset. I feel sad because Jessica is going to leave our school and I will miss her very much.

And her classmate Katie on *Railway Passage*:

> Mrs Hopes read us a book about people who lived in the train cottages Here is my oppinion of it. there were two people were kind at the beginning of the book and they were still kind at the end. The money didnt make much difference to the people the miserable people got even more miserable after they had won the money. I think if I won a lot of money I would by new clothes but I don't think I would be happy because I would war them and they would get worn out and I would be miserable again.

We could all recount occasions in booktalk when children moved from a discussion of the story to comment on related topics: money, family life, scientific information, moral and ethical problems, and so on. For example, when we studied children's responses to Philippa Pearce's *The Battle of Bubble and Squeak*, we found that there was usually a great deal of talk about the morality of Alice Sparrow's attempt to get rid of the gerbils by putting them out for the garbage men to take away. Often this extended into a discussion of the rights of animals, and, by further extension (and bringing the talk back to the text), the rights of children as against parents and the rights of parents as against children. There was also talk about the natural history of gerbils, as well as numerous anecdotes about family arrangements and tensions, comparing Philippa Pearce's fictional family with the children's own families.

Indeed, some teachers use literature solely to spark general discussion, so easily do children engage in it. For many years *My Mate Shofiq* by Jan Needle was all too often read with ten- to thirteen-year-olds mainly because it deals controversially with racial prejudice and so stimulated heated talk about that subject. In other words, it was used like a social worker's case study or a documentary piece of journalism, merely as a starting point for investigation of a social issue.

A similar example. A class of ten-year-olds was talking about Emma Smith's *No Way of Telling*. They were attracted

by the idea of being snowbound, as the girl protagonist is. Soon they began telling equally exciting incidents from their own lives; and then went on to all sorts of holiday anecdotes, from which they wandered into a discussion of what they would do if there were no school and they could do as they liked all day. They found this very entertaining. Afterwards, their teacher was pleased because she felt they had talked well and that this in itself was valuable. Maybe so, but their talk was not booktalk, not discussion focused on interpretation of a text and discovering meaning. Emma Smith's novel and their reading of it had very little to do with what they were talking about.

Of course every work of literature involves subject matter, but quite as importantly it is a linguistic event, a metaphoric construct, a 'made' object which creates, Susanne Langer has taught us to say, 'the illusion of a life in the mode of a virtual past'. 'What texts teach,' Margaret Meek reminds us, 'is a process of discovery for readers, not a programme of instruction for teachers.' The French critic Roland Barthes emphasizes a truth that content-minded teachers prefer to ignore: ' "What takes place" in narrative is, from the referential (reality) point of view, literally *nothing*; "what happens" is language alone, the unceasing celebration of its coming.'

Surely it is this passionate adventure with language we want for our children before all else. We therefore help them explore literature as its own story, and the story of literature is discovered in the story of our own and others' reading of it. Literature is a linguistic construct, what one ten-year-old boy called 'a kind of magic that happens in our heads', and our reading is a construct of the language we use in telling ourselves about it.

Here – to take an example from the other end of the education system – is Chris Bucco, a nineteen-year-old undergraduate, telling the story of her reading of a book that some people of all ages find 'difficult', Maurice Sendak's picture book *Outside Over There*. Using what she had learned from the 'Tell me' approach, she decided simply to record what happened to her as she read the book. It is a kind of reading-narrative everyone of school age and after can tell.

Outside Over There, Maurice Sendak, Bodley Head (1981). Upon looking over the cover of this book, my first impression was that Maurice Sendak was going to take the reader into a dreamland, a fantasy world outside of real, everyday existence, and that the girl and the baby illustrated were to lead us on this venture. Then came the first few pages (before the written story is introduced) with the girl and the baby accompanied by giant sunflowers, a fence (marking the boundary between 'Here' and 'Over there'?), and little goblins in dark robes with human hands and feet. At this point I realized that these creatures would play a significant part in the story and thought the story might be similar to *Where the Wild Things Are*.

The story begins – I slowly read it through and while a bit overwhelmed and confused after my first reading, I am intrigued as I know there has to be some important message(s) underlying the story. Well, a few things struck me as being salient and significant features of the story while I was trying to decipher it. One was the lack of consistency in the rhythm of the wording. The words start in iambic pentameter, 'When Pa-pa was a-way at sea', but the rhythm is quickly broken. Later, rhythm returns and disappears intermittently. Other inconsistencies are found in the pictures – in the background window the situation constantly changes from a boat on the sea to a boat sinking to goblins stealing the baby sister, etc. It seems difficult to find a clear-cut dependable pattern – constant change (could this be an important theme?).

In searching for hints of consistency, I found in the pictures the recurring appearance of the 'growing' sunflower plants and of the boat (Papa – memory of Papa and/or of his words?), as well as of the fearful goblins.

Well, after reading the book about 5 or 6 times, I began making some guesses at the message being told (in a very selective manner). I thought maybe the author is depicting the growth of Ida – showing us her increasing ability to handle responsibility, to be tolerant of her baby sister even when she displayed her 'goblin' side (as opposed to her happy side where she croons and claps 'as a baby should') and her ability to take care of her sister and her family (as this change into an 'adult' mode of responsibility may

have been thrust upon her by the death of her father [or his absence], by the arrival of her baby sister, or by the course of time – a combination of these possibilities also seems highly plausible).

In trying to discover an underlying theme in this book, I became more intrigued and more fond of the story the more I scrutinized it and the more the ideas 'seemed' to fall into place somewhat. Consequently, I ended up with a very good impression of *Outside Over There* where I, myself as the reader, am concerned.

Admittedly primary-aged children may not be able to map the uncertain path of their responses with the same assurance as Chris Bucco. But their responses would not necessarily be very different in kind, and, judging by Auden's outline, we can safely say that children are able to be critics. Children know a lot about the world in which they live. The teacher has to discover how to invite that knowledge into the discussion – then add to it, or modify it according to what she knows. And it is worth emphasizing these points:

1. Children of all ages are as various in their reading of a book as are adults. In any group some will highlight one feature, some another. And though adults who have worked a lot with children can make intelligent guesses about the features that will be most attractive or rewarding, no one ever gets it completely right. On the contrary, any teaching that enables children in the honest reporting of their responses usually gives the teacher a surprise.

2. We often underestimate the reading and critical capabilities of children. Teachers especially have been trained to assume that 'stages of development' are common to all children of roughly the same age, and to accept that children cannot distinguish between 'the real' of everyday life and 'the fictional', or the literal and the metaphoric, or the ludic role of story (when we're 'playing at life') and the irreversibly consequential finality of 'actually doing it'. However, such assumptions are at best only crudely true, and it is wiser, at least where booktalk is concerned, to act on the assumption that children are potentially all that we are ourselves, and that in telling their own stories and their

reading of other people's stories they 'talk themselves into being'. In telling their readings they activate their potentialities, but only when that reading is truly their own and is cooperatively shared, and is not someone else's reading imposed upon them.

3. In any group of children, no matter what their supposed cleverness or lack of cleverness, we find that if they begin by sharing their most obvious observations, they soon accumulate a body of understanding that reveals the heart of a text and its meaning(s) for them all. Furthermore, even when quite complicated or abstract ideas are approached this way (through story images and talked-out interpretations), there is little that children cannot grasp. In this activity there is a balance to be found between respect for the rights of the individual as a reader and talker and the corporately composed reading of the group – the community text which is always more complex and insightful than any one individual reading can ever be.

This balance in booktalk between the individual and the community seems to me a metaphor of the truly egalitarian and democratic society. Nor is the metaphor less telling when applied to adults practising booktalk among ourselves.

7 · Honourably Reportable

In helping children talk well about their reading, it is essential, for children and adults alike, to agree that *everything is honourably reportable*.

What does this mean? Because all too many children know that their responses are often dismissed as 'wrong', 'irrelevant', 'silly', 'not helpful', 'childish' (and worse), they learn to keep their thoughts to themselves. Dismissing what children 'really think' leads to their disaffection from school-based reading. Or they play the game 'Guess what's in teacher's head': they report as their own the kind of responses they sense the teacher wants to hear. This reduces literary study to a kind of multiple-choice comprehension exercise, with the teacher as the only person in the room whose observations about a text are acceptable. To be praised or given credit, everyone else must pretend to have understood the book in the same way the teacher has. As a result pupils learn to distrust their own experience of a text and, because they become skilled at saying things they have not thought and felt, they are corrupted by deceit.

The main point of the 'Tell me' approach is that we truly want to hear about the reader's experience – enjoyment or lack of it, thoughts, feelings, memories, and whatever else the reader wishes to report. For this to happen, the reader must trust that the teacher really wants an honest reaction and that therefore everything can be 'honourably reported' without risk of denial, belittlement or rejection. A reader can say, 'This is the worst book I have ever read', secure in the knowledge that the remark will not be treated as unworthy of attention.

On the contrary, what everyone seeks at the start of a 'Tell me' conversation is a glimpse of the text, that 'first book', experienced by each reader on his/her own. And out of these 'first books' shared by the members of the group is created

the larger text, the book constructed by our talk together, the one belonging to us all.

Both texts are achieved in the same way. Wolfgang Iser describes the process in Chapter 11 of *The Implied Reader*, where this passage appears:

> As we read, we oscillate to a greater or lesser degree between the building and the breaking of illusions. In a process of trial and error, we organize and reorganize the various data offered us by the text. These are the given factors, the fixed points on which we base our 'interpretation', trying to fit them together in the way we think the author meant them to be fitted. 'For to perceive, a beholder must *create* his own experience. And his creation must include relations comparable to those which the original producer underwent. They are not the same in any literal sense. But with the perceiver, as with the artist, there must be an ordering of the elements of the whole that is in form, although not in details, the same as the process of organization the creator of the work consciously experienced. Without an act of recreation the object is not perceived as a work of art.' (John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, New York, 1958, page 54)
>
> The act of recreation is not a smooth or continuous process, but one which, in its essence, relies on *interruptions* of the flow to render it efficacious. We look forward, we look back, we decide, we change our decisions, we form expectations, we are shocked by their nonfulfillment, we question, we muse, we accept, we reject; this is the dynamic process of recreation. This process is steered by two main structural components within the text: first, a repertoire of familiar literary patterns and recurrent literary themes, together with allusions to familiar social and historical contexts; second, techniques or strategies used to set the familiar against the unfamiliar.
>
> (Iser, page 288)

If we look back at the conversation recorded by Susan Lamacq on pages 35–7, we'll see some of this in action. In a 'process of trial and error', the children look forward and back in the story, form expectations, question (the ending) and muse (on what the ending might mean), accept and

reject. They tell each other about familiar literary patterns (the symbolic use of the seasons, the meaning of an empty chair), and bring their world to the world of the text by alluding to 'familiar social contexts' (how people get old, how children think).

As for Dewey's note about 'the perceiver' ordering 'the elements of the whole' in a 'process of organization the creator of the work consciously experienced', a child might put it all more simply. When Steve Bicknell asked a class of seven-year-olds how they felt after talking about a book in the 'Tell me' way, Wayne replied, 'You feel like you've had another story or the story over again.'

Booktalk, I'm suggesting, should follow 'the dynamic process of recreation' Iser describes. Teachers need a repertoire of questions that assist readers in speaking out their reading. And readers must feel secure and significant when telling the story of their reading. They must know that nothing they say will be misused or turned against them, that they will be listened to and respected – and not just by the teacher, but by everyone else in the group as well. They must know that everything they want to tell is honourably reportable.

8 · Why 'Tell me'?

On the whole it is easier to put children off talking than it is to get them started. And one of the most offputting words is the interrogative 'why?'

Early in our 'Tell me' work we learned to ban 'why?' from our teacherly vocabulary. 'I liked this book a lot,' a child would say, the teacher would reply, 'Did you? Why?' and the answer would very often be a sigh or a look of pain or shrugged shoulders or a puzzled frown: certainly a visible loss of enthusiasm.

What's the trouble with 'why'?

Most obviously, it too often sounds aggressive, threatening, oppositional, examinational.

But there are equally valid objections. First, it is a catch-all question, too big to answer all at once. No one can properly explain in a couple of sentences why s/he's liked or disliked a book. That's the reason children use shorthand catch-all words in reply: it was exciting, it was fun; it was boring, it was dull.

Second, the question 'why?' gives you no help. To talk well about a book you have to start somewhere, you have to highlight a detail you can explain easily. In trying to help people talk well, the teacher's opening questions need to give them a starting point. As we've seen, the most obvious place to begin is by asking readers to talk about details they particularly liked or disliked.

Tell me . . .

How to avoid asking 'why'? The solution, when at last we hit upon it, was not only simple but proved a turning point, for it gave us a new style. We arrived at it by searching for what we thought of as 'a conversational glottal stop'. We meant an opening word or phrase that would prevent us asking 'why?' straight out, would give us time for thought,

and would provide a broadly useful start to more subtle questions.

The phrase we found was 'Tell me . . .'

It seems obvious now, since it has become the name for our approach, but it wasn't at the time. The qualities we liked about 'Tell me . . .' are that it suggests a desire for collaboration, indicating that the teacher really does want to know what the reader thinks, and that it anticipates conversational dialogue rather than an interrogation.

9 · Meaning . . .?

Asking 'why?' isn't the only offputting opening in old-fashioned teacherly interrogation. So is the question 'What do you think that means?' Just as bad are variations like 'What was it really about?' and 'What do you think the author is trying to say?'

An understanding of meaning isn't arrived at straightaway and all at once. It is discovered, negotiated, made, arrived at organically as more specific and practical questions (see pages 83–92) are discussed. We tease away at the problem, separating out the bits we can cope with, and talk about those. Then, by sharing the bits each of us can cope with, we gradually put together an understanding that tells us something significant about the whole text.

In order to enable this to happen, the teacher must ask the kind of questions that will help the readers discover and share their understanding of the bits that seem clear to them. Now and then, like a chairperson in any discussion, the enabling adult will summarize what the group seems to be saying so that they can reconsider and shift the focus of their talk if they want to.

Stating the obvious

How often in public and even in private conversations have you kept quiet because you felt that what you wanted to say was obvious? How often have you heard – or said yourself to other people – 'Isn't that rather obvious?' Where do we learn that it is unnecessary, or foolish, to state the obvious? When you think about it, the only thing people can say is what is obvious to them. It is because children think they are meant to say something they *haven't* thought – something that isn't obvious to them – that they are often to be seen staring at the teacher in tongue-tied bewilderment.

The truth is that in any discussion some points may be

obvious to everyone but many others are not. That's why experienced participants in seminars and think-tanks begin by pooling as quickly as they can – sometimes called brainstorming – everything that seems obvious about the topic in hand. They know that finding what isn't obvious comes out of stating what is, because knowing what we have all thought or noticed, felt or understood, is the raw material out of which we can construct the meanings and understandings none of us has yet arrived at – or could do on our own.

It is by sharing what is obvious that we begin to think what none of us has thought before. I have witnessed this happening so often as groups of people of all ages talk about a shared text, and heard it reported so often by other teachers, that I know it to be one of the most exciting aspects of booktalk.

So the teacher encourages readers to start with what is obvious: to say what they think they know about a text in order to discover what they didn't know they knew. Which in turn leads them to new understandings previously unavailable to any of them.

Teacher hold back

In an early booktalk session with older children I heard a pupil ask the teacher with some exasperation, 'But what is it you want me to say?' It was a plea from someone who had come to believe that what the learner does is repeat what the teacher herself thinks because it is what the teacher wants to hear. This teacher hadn't revealed what she thought and so the pupil felt confused, threatened, anxious.

Most learners of any age tend to want to please the teacher. And they often assume that the teacher 'knows better' than they do, that the teacher has the monopoly of correct information. Of course, when it comes to the reading of a text, the truth is that the reader will always 'know better' than the teacher what has happened to him/her – what was liked and not liked, what was puzzling and what seemed understandable – because this has gone on inside the reader's head, and is hidden from the teacher until the reader reveals it. The reader alone 'knows the answers'. That is why with 'Tell me' we begin by sharing what each of us 'knows',

so that we can build up a 'knowing' composed of our various understandings.

Again, the teacher's role is like that of a chairperson. We all know that if a chairperson wants to influence a committee, she states her own views first and then asks the others for theirs. If she genuinely wants the committee's views, however, she holds back and sums up what the others have said before she offers her own. The discussion may then start again, but it is based on a more open and honest attempt to achieve a decision all the committee members have a chance to shape.

The same goes for booktalk. The teacher doesn't offer her reading of a text until late in the discussion, so that hers doesn't become the privileged point of view, or the one that determines the agenda – the one that highlights the topics for discussion. (How the booktalk agenda is established without the teacher doing it – how highlighting takes place – is explained on pages 75–82.)

So, until the pupils have confidence in themselves as readers, are confident in talking to each other about the story of their reading because they know that 'everything is honourably reportable', the teacher holds back the story of her own reading until everyone else has had their say.

Sometimes children will ask the teacher what she thinks. Answers should not be dismissive but should encourage the readers to continue:

- 'I'll tell you in a minute. Just for now, I'd like to hear what you want to say.'
- 'I was going to do that, but James said something that interested me and I'd just like to hear a bit more from him while I remember.'
- 'Be glad to tell you, if nobody else wants to say anything. You wanted to, I think, Sarah.'
- 'Well, yes, but there was something that puzzled me that I'd like you to tell me about first . . . [next 'Tell me' question is posed].'

Constantly, the teacher takes the readers back into the text and the aspects of reading it that interest them individually and as a group.

Just as pupils need to feel confident that everything is honourably reportable, so the teacher needs to feel confident that she can handle what is said – that she will 'know what to do with it', and what then to ask. Teachers at the beginning of their 'Tell me' work often feel worried about this. The key to confidence is *knowing the book very well* before talking with pupils about it.

The better you know the book, the more you'll be able to concentrate on what the children are saying, and the better you'll be at knowing which of the 'general' and 'specific' questions (see pages 83–92) to ask.

Another teacher's worry is about 'not knowing' the answers to the questions: not understanding everything in the book herself. A shift in thinking has to take place, involving a recognition that the teacher can ask questions *to which she doesn't know the answer*, and can honourably report to the children that she doesn't but that 'we're going to try it out' to see whether it helps.

The questions suggested in the Framework (pages 83–92) are a guide. As experience builds up, and the teacher realizes that the thing to do is trust the book and trust the reading group's cooperatively pooled responses, the more confidence will grow.

And remember: never try to exhaust either the book or the readers and what they want to say. Leave something for another time. Leave some questions unresolved. Leave the children wanting more: more of the book, more talk about it. And never be afraid to bring the discussion to an end sooner than you expected if the book has proved a poor choice or the children don't have much to say about it. It isn't a failure if this happens but a success: children will respect you for it and be all the readier to try again with another book another day. Even doing something as simple as this can raise your confidence and the children's confidence in you, a grown-up they can trust to be honest and to do well by them.

10 · How Do You Know That?

A class of older primary school children were talking to their teacher, our colleague Mary Sutcliffe, about *The Stone Book* by Alan Garner. Towards the end of the session Mark said, 'When I first heard it and when I read it to myself I didn't really like it much, but now that I've got more clues, you know, I know what it's like and I understand it more. I like it better now.' (from an unpublished dissertation, 'Children's Responses to Books' by Mary Sutcliffe, June 1987)

Mark is telling us what every skilled reader knows: finding clues that help you discover the kind of story you are reading leads to better understanding, and understanding leads to pleasure. Clues were found by the children saying what they had noticed (what was obvious to them), stating their difficulties (puzzles), and then sharing their explanations of the difficulties by using the clues.

Here it is in action. The class is talking about the moment in *The Stone Book* when the child-protagonist Mary is alone in the underground cavern, where she has seen the marks on the walls (a depiction of a bull, an arrowhead shape and the outline of a small hand) and the 'crowd' of footsteps imprinted on the floor, which is formed of an impervious red clay called Tough Tom. (The commentary in italics between square brackets is mine.)

Sally: What I don't get is how could *his* [the father's] mark [an arrowhead shape] be there on the wall when he hadn't done it? [*Puzzle stated.*]

Teacher: Does anybody understand that? [*Explanations invited.*]

Claire: Does it run through their generations to his grandfather, and his grandfather – they were all

stonemasons? [*Explanation based on a hypothesis which the text neither confirms nor denies; only Mary's father is described as a stonemason.*]

Andrew: Yes, his family's got a special mark. [*Supportive remark based on the same supposition.*]

Teacher: The rest of the family had the same mark as him? [*Clarification invited.*]

Mark: Do you mean it was like his father and his father's father – their marks, like his arrow was his mark? Do you think that the bull and the hand were their special marks like the arrow was his mark? [*Probing. He probably isn't sure and may have sensed there is something amiss with the explanation. He is really asking 'How do you know that?'*]

Eventually Nancy said:

Nancy: Do you think it could be like a cave-painting, and they found it? Is that another story in the stone? [*Proposing another explanation (in fact, the most likely one). Clearly, the teacher feels the class need to look carefully at the text if they are to find the answer to the question so, using Nancy's question as the reason . . .*]

I recapped at this point on the stories so far from the stone – how the stone came to be there, the ridges and furrows, the bull and the patterns inside the stone cut by Father. [*These 'stories' reflect different aspects of Father's dissatisfaction with the fundamentalist account of creation.*]

Then back to the hand, referring to the text, and who might have drawn the hand – Mary's ancestors, the cavemen? At this point someone mentioned the footprints again and there was agreement that this was a difficult part to understand. [*Rereading has focused the children's attention on – has highlighted – another problem: how the myriad footprints got there.*]

Reading from the book again was necessary – this time the section about the arrow, the bull and the hand to reinforce the discussion we'd had, and then on to Mary's discovery of the footprints.

Teacher: Are there any clues there then, listening to it again?

Mark suggested that the prints of the bare feet were from long ago, and the shoe prints those of the father's ancestors. [*He's bringing his knowledge of the world-as-it-is to the world of the text. People 'long ago' didn't wear shoes, but many of Mary's more recent ancestors would have done.*]

There was general agreement.

Zena: I think I get it now.

Nancy: Well I don't see why she thought she was in a crowd just because there were footprints. [*An inexperienced or inattentive teacher might dismiss this remark or attempt an explanation herself. A group of children who had not learned to respect each other and to treat each other's remarks as 'honourably reportable' might make fun of it, or be impatient, or ignore it. None of this happens. Instead the teacher makes a neutral comment that invites the others to help Nancy . . .*]

Teacher: I see.

Nancy: When she said she was in a crowd as real as she was . . . [*Because her remark wasn't dismissed, she feels able to try and clarify her difficulty. However, an interruption cuts her off at a crucial moment . . .*]

Mark: I don't get that. [*The teacher has an option. She could invite Nancy to finish what she was trying to say in the hope that in doing so she will discover she knows the answer to her own question (I think I'd have preferred to do this). Or she can allow the conversation to take its 'natural' course and see what happens, which is what she did.*]

Teacher: You don't understand that. Anybody else got any ideas about that? [Quoting the text:] 'The Tough Tom was crowded . . . Mary was in a crowd that could never have been . . .' Why could it never have been a crowd?

Mark: 'Cos they didn't live there together. [*Reasoning based on his earlier remark.*]

Andrew: They couldn't have all come together.

Zena: At first when she [Mary] looked at the bull and the mark she thought she was alone and she thought it was a secret place, and when she looked at the footprints, she thought that she wasn't the

only one that had been there. [*Mark and Andrew's resolutions of the difficulty are partly based on their knowledge of the 'real' world. Zena's is based more on the logic of the narrative itself. The teacher now wants to be sure everybody has understood the key point.*]

Teacher: So what could give this feeling that she was in the crowd, because that's what Nancy is puzzled about?

Mark: Is it because the footprints have sort of been preserved down there?

Some discussion here about how they could have been preserved . . .

Teacher: So what is it then that makes her feel she's in a crowd? Zena started to think of something, didn't you, Zena?

Zena: Well, it was probably because the footprints were so fresh that she probably thinks that there's been . . . a minute ago there's been some people down there. [*This must have been enough to satisfy everybody, or perhaps they had had enough of this problem for now. (See page 64 on driving discussions into the ground.) So . . .*]

We then moved on to other puzzles in the book.

Though this discussion took place when Mary Sutcliffe was still at an early stage of using the 'Tell me' approach, she was already a skilled and experienced teacher. Which is why she never actually asks the key question that lies behind all her comments and questions to the children: 'How do you know that?'

If booktalk is to take us beyond statements of the obvious, to reach thoughtful interpretations and develop understanding, we need to discover what it was that caused us to think, feel, notice, remember, reason as we did. We need to think about how we know the things that occurred to us.

Sometimes, it is useful for the teacher to ask the question 'How do you know that?' See how it works in a simple example.

A class of eight-year-olds were discussing Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*. They were well into their discussion and enjoying it when they decided that Max dreamt that he went to the place where the wild things were. The teacher then asked, 'So how long do you think it took the story to happen?' The children puzzled over this for some time without being able to resolve the question satisfactorily. Eventually a boy said, 'It takes the time of a short sleep.' 'How do you know that?' asked the teacher. The boy replied, 'Max is sent to bed without eating anything. He goes to sleep and dreams about the wild things. When he wakes up at the end his supper is waiting for him and it's still hot. When I was sent to bed for being naughty, my mum didn't leave me there all night. She brought me something to eat and kissed me goodnight.'

Though his first answer – 'It takes the time of a short sleep' – is charming, it isn't necessarily persuasive. Only when we know how he arrives at it does it 'make sense' and sound 'right'. What he did, of course, was take the logic of the narrative – the sequence of plot – and bring his own world to the text: his own experience of being a naughty boy who is sent to bed without any supper. But he only reveals this because the teacher asked 'How do you know that?' It is a simple question, asking for evidence without suggesting where it might be found, and yet it is unthreatening enough to allow the reply 'I don't know' or 'I guessed'. (Everything is honourably reportable, even intuitive understandings and guesses for which you haven't yet worked out the reasons.)

Here is Margaret Mallett helping a group of nine-year-olds tell each other what they know and what they have discovered as a result of reading *The Sheep-Pig* by Dick King-Smith, along with information books and pamphlets about pigs. Sometimes, Mallett says,

> the act of reflection reveals a mismatch between our common-sense knowledge and what we read. I asked the children if reading the books and pamphlets had changed any of their views.
>
> Stuart: . . . that pigs are very clean animals!
> MM: You had the impression before that they were dirty? Why do people think that?

Ben: Because they roll in mud and things like that.

Stuart: . . . and they smell a bit.

MM: . . . if they are kept indoors. Do they smell if they are kept out of doors, Wendy? [Wendy's special experience (on a pig farm) makes her the 'expert' in the group.]

Wendy: They still smell a little bit outdoors but the little ones don't.

MM: It's in our language isn't it – this idea of 'dirty pigs'?

One of the things being learned here is that our common-sense knowledge is sometimes modified by what we read. It is this dissonance which can stimulate reflection.

MM: What does it say here that makes Stuart now say the pig is a clean animal? What does it do that makes you think it is clean?

Stuart: It says they roll in the mud and then they clean themselves off and they go to the toilet in a separate place. [Looking at the text and paraphrasing.]

Wendy: Yes, they don't sit in the part of the field where they go to the toilet. [Wendy brings in her first-hand knowledge appropriately.]

MM: What I did not know was that pigs cannot sweat. Did you know that? [This is mentioned in the text.]

Wendy: Their skin is more dry and they haven't got as much salt in their body as us.

MM: How do you know that, Wendy?

Wendy: Because I asked the farmer about their skin and he said they do not sweat as they have less salt than us.

MM: That's interesting.

Wendy: Yes – because when you sweat salt comes out, doesn't it? [Here the text has helped Wendy to reflect and make sense of her first-hand observations.]

(Margaret Mallett, 'How Long Does a Pig Live? Learning Together from Story and Non-Story Genres', pages 179-80)

An essential point embedded in the basic question 'How do you know that?' is this: one of the things the teacher does is to make sure the readers keep on returning to the text, and their experience of reading it, in order for them to discover the source of their 'knowings'. Students quickly come to expect sympathetically phrased challenges to vague comments, and they begin to use the same challenges on each other. They recognize that each time they do this they get closer to saying what they mean.

But which texts should we ask children to read with such care? How do we choose them?

11 · Selecting the Text

The Reading Circle (page 12) reminds us that everything begins with selection. Before we can talk about a book we need to have read it; before we can read a book we need to choose a book to read. And because the book we choose will contain within it the potentialities for our talk – subject matter, ideas, language and image, provocations to memory, and so on – choosing a book is a high-value activity. They who choose are exercising power.

Think of recent heated arguments about the UK government's insistence that certain books, certain authors should be read by children in school. Think of the debate surrounding feminism and the literary 'canon': the books thought worthy of study at university level. Think of the everlasting worry among adults about whether or not children are harmed by reading 'rubbish' and what is 'rubbish' and what isn't. It matters because we all know, whether we admit it or not, that what you read has an effect on you. (In truth, there would be little point in reading if it didn't.) The effect is not necessarily the one the writer intended or your teachers or parents hoped for – reading the Bible doesn't necessarily convert you to Christianity, reading Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* doesn't necessarily turn you into a communist, and reading Hitler's *Mein Kampf* doesn't necessarily make you anti-semitic. But certainly there is an effect of some kind, and therefore we know it does matter what you read and who makes the choice.

The selection of books children shall 'study' in school is usually made in one of three ways:

- teacher's choice without reference to the children;
- children's choice approved by the teacher;
- required reading, the 'set book' imposed on teacher and children by some 'higher' authority: headteacher or head

of department, examination system, a professionally agreed curriculum, government diktat.

Of these, the teacher's choice is the most significant here, but some general points should be kept in mind.

1. *Time.* Booktalk of the 'Tell me' kind is time-consuming. Frequently a session with nine-year-olds goes on for forty minutes or an hour. Longer, sometimes. Less usually means either that the book yielded very little – it was banal, perhaps, or too well-known and easily understood; or it was too much for the children, presenting too many difficulties that lay outside the range of their knowledge or earlier reading; or they were in the wrong mood, their minds set against the activity, and couldn't 'give themselves to it'.

Nor is age anything to go by. I've observed and heard of five-year-olds spending fifty minutes on a picture book. I've been kept going by a group of seven-year-olds for an hour and thirty minutes, reading and talking about the poems in Jill Bennett's *Roger Was a Razor Fish*. Colleagues have told me of groups of ten-year-olds who needed two or three sessions of forty minutes each to get through all they wanted to say about books that have absorbed them. Until recently most teachers would not have thought it possible for children to concentrate for such periods of time. What makes it possible is the choice of book and the teacher's skill at maintaining the discourse.

Because so much time is needed, a high educational value is being placed on the activity itself, as well as on the books chosen for discussion, which means that 'Tell me' sessions can never be a matter of everyday routine. Most upper primary classes these days are lucky if they can manage one every two weeks. If the book involved is a children's novel, one every three weeks is more likely: about nine or ten in a school year. Nine or ten books judged worthy of such concentrated attention. Quite obviously, the teacher must identify strong reasons for the choice of book.

2. *Context.* If you're alarmed by the implications of point (1), you must remember that 'Tell me' booktalk isn't an isolated activity, the only time that children talk about what they've read, nor are these 'high value' books the only ones they talk about. 'Tell me' booktalk only works well when

accompanied by less formal talk and informal gossip going on among children themselves and between the teacher and children in and out of class. 'Tell me' booktalk is a full-dress special activity, part of the wider everyday reading environment which supports and extends it.

3. *Honouring children's tastes*. Just as children talk best when they know that everything is honourably reportable, so children's mental 'set' – their attitude to formal talk – will be positive and favourable if they know that their tastes in reading will also be respected. This means that the teacher must display a willingness to make the children's choice part of the 'Tell me' selection.

How this is done is more a matter of the teacher's personality and experience than prescription. Some achieve it by discussing the choice with the children, some by allowing the choice to emerge from the children's enthusiasms, some by setting up committee-like pupil groups to select, say, one book per term, and so on. One teacher I know of sets a 'core' group of five books which all the children read over the course of a school year, along with a 'supplementary' list of which the children are required to read at least twenty-five during the year. I don't think it matters how it is done, so long as it is honest and understood by the children.

Clearly, however, there are hard questions to be tackled. Of balance, for example: what proportion of children's choice should be allowed? And what should a teacher do when children are keen to talk about a book the teacher thinks unsuitable or a waste of time? Some guiding principles:

– Be as open and honest as possible. Honour children's ability and willingness to consider why you think as you do. This will provoke discussion, itself very useful, about their and your reasons for accepting or rejecting a book, and how many of their choices should be included.

– Children expect a teacher to be decisive, and they know they are in school to learn. Once their arguments have been listened to *and discussed*, make a decision, explain why that is the best decision for their needs as learners, and then stick to it.

– Sometimes children can learn as much from making mistakes as from being guided by the teacher's judgement. During the first few 'Tell me' sessions it is useful to include one book chosen by the children, even if it seems a wildly mistaken choice. This demonstrates the teacher's willingness to honour their taste and usually has one of two results. Either the teacher discovers from the children's talk that there is more in the book than she had thought, or the children discover that personal enthusiasm for a book doesn't necessarily mean it is a good one for concentrated formal talk – even, perhaps, that it isn't quite the book they thought it was. Besides, if the book doesn't yield much, the talk will peter out and everyone will be glad to get on with something else, so not much time will have been lost anyway. Which leads to the next point.

– Never be afraid to abandon a session if it isn't going well, rather than drive the whole activity into the ground. Explain to the children why you're doing this and ask if they agree. Here is another aspect of everything being honourably reportable. (I have sometimes done this – suggested that we stop a session because I thought no one was getting much from it – only to be told by the group that they wanted to go on for a little while longer. I'd misinterpreted unresponsiveness as boredom and lack of interest, when in fact all that was needed was more time for thought. I was expecting too much too soon.)

Teacher's choice

In the years before the public exam system takes control, and especially in the primary school where the classroom teacher often has freedom of choice, the book selection of many teachers, for reading aloud and for classroom study, tends to be a mix of familiar favourites known from experience to be successful and newly discovered books that excite the teacher's enthusiasm so much she can't wait to try them out. No matter how well this may work in the hands of a skilled teacher, stimulating children to read what the teacher wishes, it isn't good enough. (In the hands of a weak or poorly informed teacher, or one uninterested in literary reading, it can be disastrous for the children.)

The point to keep in mind is that all new reading depends on previous experience. Look at what happens when the public exam system requires a fifteen-year-old to study, let's say, a selection of poetry by Ted Hughes. If the pupil has not read or been taught much poetry, then the probability is that Hughes's poems will seem 'difficult'. If the pupil has read and been taught a lot of 'children's' poetry, but only the kind that uses regular rhythms and rhymes and is comfortable and amusing in its treatment of subject matter, then Hughes's work will seem awkward, edgy, strange, unsettling, and difficult. In either case the pupil is more likely to be put off than turned on. The explanation is quite simple. The pupil's previous experience of poetry has not prepared her for this kind of writing. She doesn't know 'how to read it'. In fact, there is nothing very difficult in Hughes's language – his choice of words, his arrangement of them. Nor is there anything particularly difficult in his poetic techniques. But he uses both language and technique densely: he concentrates a lot into a few lines. If you haven't come across anything like it before, or anything like it handled with slightly less density, then it seems difficult, awkward, strange. You don't feel 'up to it', it daunts you, and you want to give up and go back to the familiar, to what you know better and 'enjoy more'.

The question for teachers is: what does a child need to read, what poems would prepare her for her encounter with Hughes and his kind of poetry? The same question can be applied to all reading. What should a child read in order to be 'ready' for Shakespeare by the time she is in her teens? What stories should a child read that will make it possible for her eventually to take on the great modern novelists? Is this done by reading certain poems, plays, stories – a kind of preparatory course of key texts? Or is it done some other way?

There is no single right answer to any of these questions. Too much depends on local and historic circumstances, not to mention the particularities of individual children. The fact is, however, that every teacher has to ask them and find answers that are judged right for her situation. This should not be done alone but in cooperation with colleagues at school and locally. Here again talk is the key: so long as we negotiate

together the answers to very difficult questions of this kind, we are protecting the interests of our children in the best way we can.

Here is an example. Towards the end of an in-service course on reading and literature in the primary school, I set the course members the task of compiling lists of books they would advise every teacher to have read before starting in their first jobs. The teachers divided into groups of five. One group was given the poetry list to compile, one picture books, one fiction for six- to nine-year-olds (to include traditional tales), one novels. The choice was limited to twenty titles each.

The poetry group had little difficulty, though couldn't do with less than twenty-three titles and regarded all of them, except three, as suitable for the complete age range, believing that poetry cannot be regarded as age-specific, except for questions of language. The picture-book group also had little difficulty, but couldn't bring themselves to list less than thirty-four titles. These they arranged into 'Early encounters' moving on to 'Later encounters', because they felt there was an order in which one book would help a child to read another with more 'ease'. The fiction six-to-nine group found themselves very critical of the books published for this age – too many routine series books of a banal kind all made to look alike, they said – and, after a lot of discussion, finally decided on fifteen 'key' books, four 'classics', and three collections of traditional tales, all headed by an introduction:

> This list is representative of the significant authors who write for this age range. It is arranged to form a natural progression within which there are at least three categories: relationships; animals; fantasy and short stories.

The group making up the list of novels had the hardest time and took the longest. The problem, they said, was that there were so many books they would like a beginning teacher to know that it was impossible to limit the number to twenty; and really it wasn't so much particular books that mattered as particular authors. Their solution was to divide their list into two sections: the first of twelve books by seven authors; the second of twenty-three books by seventeen authors. Their introduction stated:

> The first section lists very important books by very important authors. The second supplements and complements them. We have sometimes given two titles, one eventually leading to the other.

So these teachers too had a view about progression, about one book, one kind of narrative, even one author preparing you for another.

Though their lists were useful to pre-service students whom I was also teaching at that time (1989), as well as to the teachers attending the course, the greatest value was in the discussion of fundamental questions generated among the course members – which books their pupils should read and study and why. Whether they adopted the lists or not mattered less than that their everyday practice had been shared and scrutinized and thought about. Giving the exercise a real purpose – preparing lists for actual students in training – and focusing the fundamental questions in an unusual and practically specific way that used their own professional knowledge and hindsight – which books should a beginning teacher know, which books do you now wish you had known at the start of your career so as to be capable of enabling children well from day one? – helped the teachers come at their current everyday problems from a refreshing direction.

On another occasion a group of teachers were asked to decide what different kinds of narrative modes children should encounter by the time they left primary school, and to list books that exemplified them. Their list of narrative modes consisted of:

> First-person narrators
> Third-person narrators
> Combinations of first and third person
> Stories written in the past tense, historic present, and combinations of tense
> Letters
> Journals / diaries
> Interior monologue
> Stories confined to dialogue and narrative action, without comment by the narrator or insight into the interior lives of the characters

Stories told in dialogue only
Playscript
Stories in which words and pictures are integrally used to tell the story but are not picture books or illustrated stories
Pictorial novels
Comic strip
Stories of everyday contemporary life,
of fantasy,
of history,
of possible futures
And so on. Which other modes would you and your colleagues add?

Their accompanying list of books tried to cover the primary age range. As time is always short, they gave special emphasis to fiction that combines more than one of the narrative modes. For example, *Dear Mr Henshaw* by Beverly Cleary combines a first-person narrator with both diary and letter form and is a story of contemporary everyday life enjoyed by a wide range of readers aged from eight to eleven. *The Stone Book* by Alan Garner uses dialogue with third-person narrative in the past tense confined to action, does not discuss motive or narrate the characters' interior thoughts, is historically based (1860s), is controlled by a subtle use of image and is carefully structured, like a poem or a piece of music, as a sequence of linked 'movements' or episodes, all taking place during the course of one day in the life of the protagonist, Mary.

A useful case-study of a teacher revising her work was published in an article entitled 'Irony Age Infants' in the *Times Educational Supplement* (23 April 1993). Esther Thomas described how she helped her nursery-aged pupils (four- to five-year-olds) discover the essential quality of irony:

> Having recently reviewed our provision of books ... I knew that several were ideal starting points for children to grasp the idea of more than one level of meaning taking place at once, and some that showed contradictory meanings ... Surely this is an ideal starting point for grasping the idea of simultaneous meanings where they are relatively easily distinguishable.

To introduce the idea of irony, Esther Thomas used books like *A Walk in the Park* and *Changes* by Anthony Browne, *Our Cat Flossie* and *If at First You Do Not See* by Ruth Brown, *Time To Get Out of the Bath, Shirley* by John Burningham, *Rosie's Walk* by Pat Hutchins, and *Awful Arabella* by Bill Gillham. She makes the point that children 'need encouragement to look at things and talk about what they see' and 'time to browse and talk about illustrations' before they 'form the habit of scanning pictures for alternative meanings'. Her experience demonstrates how a teacher can design a programme of enjoyable reading-and-talk that has a rationale, an underlying purpose, helping children develop as sophisticated, thoughtful literary readers. After reporting a group of seven children's booktalk while reading *Never Satisfied* by Fulvio Testa, she concluded that:

> – most of the children could see or be helped to see two possible levels of meaning in the story;
> – ability to decode the text for themselves was not necessary for such understanding to develop;
> – neither age nor sex affected their responses;
> – adults should beware of imposing their own presuppositions on children.
>
> On the basis of this limited sample it seems nursery-aged children can see irony at its simplest level, if suitable books and sensitive booktalk are used. The enjoyment most of the children showed encourages me to believe that repeating this kind of reading activity will extend children's expectations of literature: they will come to expect a book to offer more than the obvious.
>
> Being able to read between the lines also includes the recognition of the different possible interpretations of meaning. Children need to hear alternative versions of the same story in fiction, and, later, to be aware that different newspapers may present conflicting accounts of 'the truth', as do different historians and different scientists.

Esther Thomas's review of her work and what she was trying to achieve led her to conclusions about very young children's capabilities that earlier in her career she might not have thought possible, that certainly would have been questioned by the majority of adults working with that age

group. Reviewing her work also led her to put together a coherent sequence of books intended to develop a particular aspect of her pupils' reading experience. We all need to do this, whatever stage of education we work in.

Try adding your own examples of 'key' books to your list of essential formal encounters; and do the same thing with a group of colleagues. Your book knowledge will be tested in this way, and you'll soon become aware of gaps you need to fill.

Reading records

A related point to do with developing children's awareness. If all new reading depends on earlier reading, then it is obvious that an enabling adult needs to know what a child has already read and has heard read aloud if the adult is to make informed decisions about what to offer next. We can only do this if a book-by-book record is kept of the child's reading. I deal with this in detail in Chapter 9, 'Keeping Track', in *The Reading Environment*.

In brief: the teacher's choice for booktalk should have a rationale, should not be arbitrary, should not only rely on the impulse of the moment. And it needs to be reviewed and refreshed regularly, just as your book knowledge needs to be increased all the time, which means keeping in touch both with what is being published and with other enabling adults who share your reading and your teaching strategies.

12 · Reading the Text

The nature and quality of our talk about a book depends a great deal on our reading of it – how much attention we've paid, which parts bored us, which we skipped, which especially excited us, which made us thoughtful, which stirred strong emotions, which provoked memories of our past life and of our previous reading, which taught us things we didn't know, and so on. Clearly, then, if we are to help children talk as well as they can about a book, we must think about the circumstances of their reading – where and when it will be done. *The Reading Environment* goes into these aspects of the subject in detail. For present purposes it can be discussed under these headings.

In-class reading

Because money is always short and book funds are smaller than ever, a main problem of all shared reading in school is having enough copies of any one book. So we need to make careful decisions about which kind of shared reading suits which books. Some novels are best read privately by children outside classtime. Some books work very well when read aloud and can then be passed around for a second reading by children on their own or in pairs or threes. Poems and some short stories can be photocopied (within the terms of the copyright law of course). Most schools build up a collection of sets of books that staff find regularly useful. But all old hands tell stories of stock cupboards that hide piles of sets bought over the years in fits of enthusiasm or by teachers who moved on, leaving behind expensive legacies that no one now wants.

1. *Reading aloud.* Picture books, poems, short stories and 'single session' books like *The Shrinking of Treehorn* by Florence Parry Heide, *Sarah, Plain and Tall* by Patricia MacLachlan and Roberto Piumini's *Mattie and Grandpa* lend themselves to reading aloud. For infant, early junior children

and learning readers of any age, this may be necessary anyway if they are to enjoy the words as much as the pictures.

Short novels like *The Battle of Bubble and Squeak* by Philippa Pearce, Ted Hughes's *The Iron Man*, the work of Betsy Byars, and *Slake's Limbo* by Felice Holman are just right for serialized reading over a week or ten days, a chapter or two a day. They are not so long as to occupy too much time in a term or to tax the memories or the patience of the listeners. If individual children want to read the stories for themselves afterwards, a single copy can go the rounds quite quickly so that the impetus of interest isn't lost.

Because of their strong plots and the episodic structuring of their narratives some longer novels serialize well: *Carrie's War* by Nina Bawden, for example, or *I Am David* by Anne Holm, or *The Haunting* by Margaret Mahy. But beware of facing children with a book that seems never-ending and which demands a good memory for descriptive detail rather than for plotful action; by the time the reading is finished, if they aren't bored to death, they'll quite likely have forgotten too much for them to be able to talk intelligently.

Other advantages of reading aloud are that the time it takes to read the text is the same for everyone; and because the reading is happening in school it doesn't depend on the individual child's determination to read the book in his or her own time, or to give it the length of time it needs.

However, remember that hearing a story read aloud is a different experience from reading it for yourself. The one isn't simply a substitute for the other. The difference is often clear from what is said during booktalk among a group, some of whom have read for themselves a book that the others have only listened to. (Deliberately setting this up is itself an interesting variation on the basic model for booktalk.)

2. *Independent reading*. Though the daily in-class reading time is intended for each child's own choice of book, it is sometimes necessary to allow, if not require, that a book you want everyone to read be read then. This helps children who come from homes where it is hard for them to read quietly on their own. It also means you can get through on small sets – say, five copies – rather than whole-class sets of books. But independent reading time should be commandeered sparingly.

Own-time reading

Otherwise known as 'homework'. For most children this means that reading becomes a chore and the pleasure is lessened, if not lost. Which is why the books chosen for booktalk should as often as possible emerge from the children's own enthusiasms – or at least appear to do so, for a good teacher is skilled at generating reading enthusiasms for books she wants the class to read. But teachers shouldn't be afraid now and then to require that a book be read; and with older pupils it is unavoidable because of the demands of the curriculum and the examination system. So long as there is a mix of choices, as outlined in the previous chapter, occasional requirement needn't become deadening or boring. It is unvarying and regular teacher-choice required to be read for homework that has helped make so many unwilling, disaffected readers.

Rereading

Children know the pleasures of rereading; they constantly reread favourite books. Critics know the necessity of rereading; it's the only way to get to know a text well enough to compliment it with more than passing attention. Of course, experienced readers can do more with a one-time reading than can inexperienced readers. But whatever your facility, the point remains: books that are worth bothering with at all are worth (may demand) rereading.

One Canadian teacher I know, Mary Mesheau, has a legend pinned over the board about how reading a book for the first time is like making a new friend and rereading is like returning to an old one (a good summary of Wayne C. Booth's book *The Company We Keep*). When I visited her class of ten-year-olds, the children talked to me about multilayered stories (their phrase). I explained I thought of this like the layers of soil and rock, one beneath another, in the ground beneath our feet. They explained that they thought of it like a cake with various layers of filling.

I am *not* suggesting that we should always require rereading for 'Tell me' booktalk – rather that we should encourage it for its own sake, confirming its value and rightness when we find children rereading a book because they want to or think it will help their studies. And I *am* suggesting that we should employ subtle techniques for

helping children to reread as part of their booktalk activity. (Earlier, I explained the importance of the question 'How do you know that?', one result of which is to guide the reader back to the text to find out what provoked the response.)

Equally, one of the benefits of well-run booktalk is that children often want to reread a book because of what other children have said about it. In other words, rereading doesn't necessarily come before the talk; it may come after. And sometimes that leads to more talk, whether formal or informal.

Picture books, poems and short stories are more easily reread before or during the talk than are longer novels, which is one reason why many teachers resort to such texts more often for booktalk sessions. Be wary of this, however; otherwise some forms of narrative that children should encounter may be skimped or left out.

Time between reading and talk

Don't expect the same maturity of response after a text has been read for the first time as you get if there has been an interval between reading and talking, when the children have had a chance to mull it over. Of course the time-gap mustn't be so long that significant details are forgotten. For children, a weekend is often just right, two weeks too long, unless the text is short and can be reread just before the talk. You can often sense, after a reading, whether or not it should be left alone for a while. And once children are familiar with the 'Tell me' approach, they will let you know when they feel the need to think about a book or to reread it before they talk. Indeed, this becomes part of the activity of telling each other about their reading. Whether you need to pause and think, be private with the book-in-your-mind, perhaps to glance again at one passage and another: all this belongs to the experience of that particular text. In this way the time it takes becomes part of the pleasure of reading.

Informal talk between readings

During the serialized reading of a book there will usually be opportunities for informal booktalk. This can be very important in sustaining interest in longer novels.

13 · Highlighting

All reading begins by selecting something to read; all booktalk begins by highlighting – by selecting what to talk about.

In the old teacher-dictated model of how booktalk should be conducted, it was usually the teacher who chose the topic. If the class were studying, for example, *Macbeth*, the teacher would begin by saying something like, 'Last week we thought about the influence of the three witches on Macbeth; this week I want us to think about Lady Macbeth . . .' Or if the class had read *The Eighteenth Emergency* by Betsy Byars, the teacher would direct the talk onto the subject of bullying. Even if the teacher asked, 'What seemed to you the most important thing about this story?', she would generally select from what was offered the topic that most interested her, or that she thought it most beneficial for the class to discuss.

There's nothing intrinsically wrong with this approach, and I am not suggesting that it should be abandoned completely; it has a place as a teaching strategy. But I suspect it pays scant regard to what has most interested or seemed significant to the student readers. It is about the readers discovering the book the teacher wants them to find, rather than cooperative talk in which a community of readers make discoveries far beyond anything they could have found on their own.

For this kind of mutually cooperative talk, the critic Wayne C. Booth coined the term 'coduction', from the Latin *co-* ('together') and *ducere* ('to lead, draw out, bring, bring out'). In other words, in coductive booktalk we all, as a community of readers, cooperate to draw out of each other what we think we know about a text and our reading of it. It is this kind of cooperative talk that the 'Tell me' approach attempts to achieve. If this is to be a genuine intention on the part of the teacher, the topics selected for discussion must

come from the readers as a group rather than from the teacher, or indeed from any one dominant person.

How is this achieved? By a simple prelude to the discussion itself. We begin by discovering what it is that occupies our minds, out of which will emerge the first topic to be highlighted. In this way –

Highlighting the first topic for talk

The teacher, or the booktalk leader (for it need not always be a teacher), asks in turn the four basic booktalk questions: Tell me . . .

– Was there anything that you liked about this book?
– Was there anything that you disliked?
– Was there anything that puzzled you?
– Were there any patterns – any connections – that you noticed?

Readers are asked only to call out short headline-like replies (one word, if possible) and *not* to explain anything.

Each question is taken in turn, giving the group long enough to offer what seems obvious to them. As soon as further replies need to be thought about the teacher moves on to the next question, making it clear, however, that replies to previous questions can still be added to the lists.

The readers' words should be used in making the lists. If you (the teacher/leader) are not clear, use the 'Do you mean . . . or do you mean . . . ?' technique of suggesting possibilities to clarify the confusion, but then still use only the words offered by the reader.

Write the lists down; preferably on the board or an overhead projector – something large enough for all the group to see. If that can't be done, or for a change, write them on a large pad. The key thing is that the lists must be recorded so that they can be referred to later. But, for the best results, the readers must be able to see them for themselves.

Let's look at an example. The book involved was *The Dearest Boy in All the World* by Ted van Lieshout; the readers were a Year Four class (eight-year-olds) with their teacher, Hazel Biggs, in a school in Perth, Western Australia, sometime in January 1990. There are three versions. Figure 1 shows the answers to the four basic questions recorded in

shopping-list style. Figure 2 shows the lists presented diagrammatically, as on a chalk- or whiteboard: easier to see and to make comparisons between the various headline entries.

Figure 3 shows how the agenda is decided. When the lists have been compiled, the readers are asked to identify any topic included in more than one column and/or mentioned more than once. These are joined by lines drawn to and from them. If there is any doubt about whether an entry does or doesn't refer to the linking topic, the person who offered that entry is asked to decide.

When all the combinations have been joined together, we look to see which entry has most lines leading to it, and this is chosen as the first topic for discussion. If you look at Figure 3, you'll see that the twin subjects of 'Snails' and 'The castle on the snail' are most often identified, with the business of Tim begging and using his father's hat for the money coming next.

In fact, any one of the headlines could be taken as a starting point, because everything mentioned has been provoked by the text; any one of them, therefore, would get the talk going and could lead somewhere useful. However, by highlighting in the way suggested, we ensure *and demonstrate* that the preoccupation of no one member of the group is privileged over anyone else's. From the process of pooling our interests has emerged a topic that interests a number of people in the group. A decision has been negotiated without anyone (especially the teacher) being able to exercise dominating control over the others. The result is that everyone feels better disposed to accept this as the place to begin: it feels fairer, more agreeable. Which helps create a set of mind, an attitude in the group, of genuine cooperation, of coduction.

Getting the talk going

After the highlighting, the teacher asks each reader who suggested a linked entry to say a little more – whatever s/he wishes – about her/his headline. Begin with the likes and dislikes, move to the puzzles, and leave those who saw patterns till last – because it is the discovery of patterns, and the reasons for them, that leads to an interpretive

LIKES

The way the snail came on the bottom of the pages
I liked it because I am 9 and have asthma and I have a brother who is 7 (Note: no father in family)
The thought of getting a job as a straight-line drawer
Liked him telling about his own worries
The way his mum called him the dearest boy in all the world all the time
The sudden beginning
The whole book, because it was different
His sister pretending to be a TV interviewer
The way he helped his sister when she had an asthma attack
The way he had of doing things his own way
The way he worried about his wife and children in the future
I don't usually like to read books twice, but that one I want to read myself now that you have read it to us

DISLIKES

The way Tim talked about his dad dying all the time
The way his sister was afraid of dying of asthma
When he was sitting on the pavement and looking at the ground all the time
The sign and the hat and expecting people to put money in it. He was begging
Difficult to get interested at the beginning
The ending

THINGS THAT PUZZLED ME

The way it ended – neither happy nor sad. Didn't really make sense but the drawings helped
The castle on the snail. I wasn't sure what it meant
Putting sugar in the tea after an asthma attack
His mother letting him beg for money
The foreign coin
The way no one tried to mug him when he was sitting on the pavement
The way his sister made fun of him when he was on the pavement

ANY PATTERNS NOTICED

Snails
The castle on the snail
His sister's asthma attacks
His worries
The snail with the load being overtaken by the other snails
The link between the book his sister gave him, the story of his problems and the snails on the page
His father's hat

Figure 1

LIKES	DISLIKES	PUZZLES	PATTERNS
The way the snail came on the bottom of the pages	Tim talking about his dad dying all the time	The way it ended	Snails
Getting a job as a straight-line drawer	His sister being afraid of dying of asthma	Didn't really make sense but the drawings helped	The castle on the snail
Tim telling about his worries	Tim sitting on the pavement and looking at the ground all the time	The castle on the snail – wasn't sure what it meant	His sister's asthma attacks
His mum calling him dearest boy all the time	The sign and the hat and Tim expecting people to put money in – he was begging	Putting sugar in the tea after the asthma attack	His worries
The sudden beginning	Difficult to get interested at the beginning	His mother letting him beg	The snail with the load being overtaken by the other snails
The whole book, because it was different	The ending	The foreign coin	The link between the book his sister gave him, the story of his problems, and the snails
His sister pretending to be a TV interviewer		Why no one tried to mug him when he was sitting on the pavement	His father's hat
The way Tim helped his sister when she had an asthma attack		The way Evie made fun of Tim when he was sitting on the pavement	
Having his own way of doing things			
Worrying about his wife and children in the future			

Figure 2

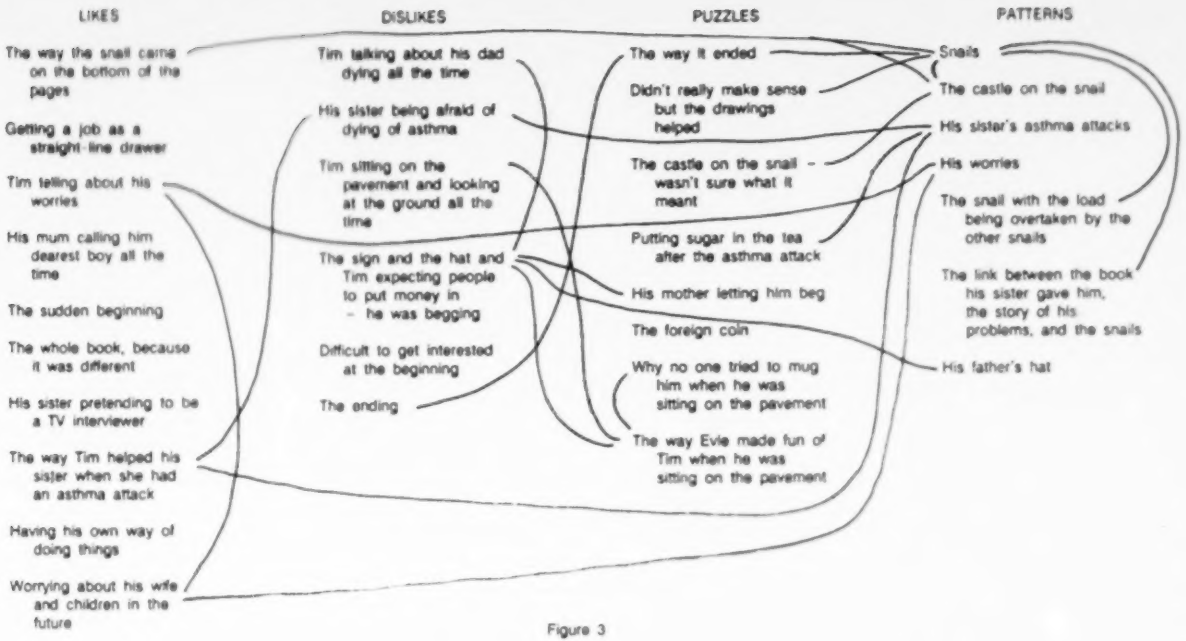
LIKES
DISLIKES
PUZZLES
PATTERNS
The way the snail came on the bottom of the pages
Getting a job as a straight-line drawer
Tim telling about his worries
His mum calling him dearest boy all the time
The sudden beginning
The whole book, because it was different
His sister pretending to be a TV interviewer
The way Tim helped his sister when she had an asthma attack
Having his own way of doing things
Worrying about his wife and children in the future
Tim talking about his dad dying all the time
His sister being afraid of dying of asthma
Tim sitting on the pavement and looking at the ground all the time
The sign and the hat and Tim expecting people to put money in – he was begging
Difficult to get interested at the beginning
The ending
The way it ended
Didn't really make sense but the drawings helped
The castle on the snail – wasn't sure what it meant
Putting sugar in the tea after the asthma attack
His mother letting him beg
The foreign coin
Why no one tried to mug him when he was sitting on the pavement
The way Evie made fun of Tim when he was sitting on the pavement
Snails
The castle on the snail
His sister's asthma attacks
His worries
The snail with the load being overtaken by the other snails
The link between the book his sister gave him, the story of his problems, and the snails
His father's hat

Figure 3

understanding of a text or a particular aspect of it. By moving towards a discussion of recognized patterns, of connections between features in a text, we map the process of interpretation itself, and show it in action. In other words, proceeding in this way is in itself a teaching act. We're teaching children to make meaning, and at the same time showing how that is done.

Inevitably, as this talk develops, new insights will be added, comments made that are intended to be helpful but prove to be red herrings or blind alleys. Anecdotes – world-to-text – will be told, memories of other books brought into the conversation. The talk will convolute, elaborate on itself, flounder for a while (no one knowing quite what to say next: be patient, wait, it'll happen), turn back on itself, suddenly jump from one topic to another. Remember Iser (page 46):

> The act of recreation is not a smooth or continuous process . . . We look forward, we look back, we decide, we change our decisions, we form expectations, we are shocked by their nonfulfillment, we question, we muse, we accept, we reject . . .

That is what happens when we are talking well about a book.

All along the teacher will do four things:

1. Keep on bringing the readers back to the text by strategies such as asking 'How do you know that?'

2. Be ready to ask 'general' questions that might help develop the talk (see next chapter), and also –

3. Be ready to ask a question particular to the book in hand. By accident of habit these book-specific questions have come to be called by students to whom I've taught the 'Tell me' approach the 'special questions' (as opposed to the basic and general questions that start the talk and develop it). They are intended to help readers find a way into the text that they haven't been able to locate for themselves. They are neutral in the sense that they do not betray the teacher's reading of the book, but they do help highlight a feature of the book that the readers haven't yet considered and which, in the teacher's judgement, they would find it useful to think about.

It is in asking the special questions that the teacher moves from being an enabler of the conversation – a kind of chairperson and facilitator – to being a teacherly participant in deciding what shall be talked about. This centrally important aspect of 'Tell me' booktalk is dealt with in the next chapter.

4. Now and then, when you judge it is appropriate, sum up what seems to have been said so that everyone has a chance to remember, to find some coherence in the talk, and eventually to reach interpretive understandings: propositions, agreements, disagreements to do with meaning. In other words, the teacher helps make sure that it is, in Wayne Booth's words, 'a kind of conversation that might *get somewhere* – not just a sharing of subjective opinions but a way of learning from one another . . .'

This is only one method of highlighting, an especially useful way to begin when pupils and teacher are unfamiliar with one another. After a while, as confidence and trust grow, other cooperative reader-responsive ways of setting the agenda will suggest themselves, as examples included in Chapter 15 demonstrate.

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14 · The Framework of 'Tell me' Questions: Basic, General and Special

THE BASIC QUESTIONS

As children get used to the 'Tell me' approach, they tend not to bother with the questions about likes and dislikes but move at once to the puzzles and patterns. They have learned that talking about what has puzzled them and finding patterns inside the text give them the most satisfaction. Answers to the first two questions are not abandoned altogether, however, but are woven into the talk about mysteries and connections. That is, they tell what they liked or didn't like when this will contribute directly to their understanding.

THE GENERAL QUESTIONS

These questions, which can be asked of any text, widen the scope of language and references, provide comparisons, and help by bringing into the conversation ideas, information and opinions that assist understanding.

Some of the general questions are always applicable, like 'Have you read any other stories [books, poems, whatever] like this?' Our facility with new texts depends a great deal on our previous reading. Comparing a new text with others that seem to have similarities or contrasting features helps sort out ideas about the new one.

Some variations on the opening basic questions encourage different ways of approaching a text – like this: 'When you first saw the book, even before you read it, what kind of book did you think it was going to be? . . . Now you've read it, is it what you expected?'

Then there are questions that help round off the talk and draw conclusions: 'What will you tell your friends about this book?' 'We've listened to each other and heard all sorts of things about this book. Were you surprised by anything someone else said?'

'How many different stories [alternatively: kinds of story] can you find in this story?' is a question that helps the discovery that any worthwhile text is multilayered, that it can mean more than one thing, that it offers different kinds of meaning. If you ask it, for example, of Philippa Pearce's novel *The Way to Sattin Shore*, you're likely to be told that there is:

- a mystery-detective story about Kate's father;
- a family story to do with the relationships between Kate and her mother and grandmother and brothers;
- a story about childhood and what it is like to be Kate, who has friendships, keeps a petted cat, plays games, cooks, enjoys a day out in the snow, goes cycling, and so on;
- an adventure story centred on the ride to Sattin Shore;
- and a story about language and how it can be interesting in itself: the first few pages play with images of light and dark; the beginning takes about the same time to read aloud as the action it describes would take to happen; it is full of biblical images (the main title includes the words 'the way', which echoes 'I am the way, the truth and the life'; the first chapter title, 'The Beam of Darkness', puns on 'before you take out a mote from your brother's eye first take out the beam from your own').

The reader who made this last point helped us to find another story in the book, one based on Christian redemption, and it was only when this occurred to us that some who had been dissatisfied with the ending, because they were thinking of it in a too literal, narrowly realistic sense, saw how it could be read satisfyingly as a metaphor, a language game.

I'm reminded of Roland Barthes' words: 'To read [to listen to] a narrative is not merely to move from one word to the next, it is also to move from one level to the next.' One level of language-use to the next, one level of story-making to

the next, one level of meaning to another. This is how skilled readers read; it is how we should help children to read. My increasing experience is that they are entirely capable of it at every school age, if only the teacher understands how to enable them by providing richly made books, time to read them, time to talk about them together, and knows which questions to ask.

But it isn't only a matter of the teacher having questions ready in her head; she will also be tuned to the conversation, using questions – 'general' or 'special' – when she feels they will bring out something that is trembling on the edge of being said, or help a child to articulate something only vaguely felt. The point is that the questions shouldn't be used indiscriminately when there is a lull in the conversation or when the teacher feels compelled to cover more ground.

'One of the things that makes this kind of booktalk endlessly attractive,' Lissa Paul wrote to me, 'is the way each group develops its agenda. It helps if teachers remember that – it also makes them less anxious to make sure that the same things come out every time.'

THE SPECIAL QUESTIONS

Every book possesses its own peculiarities: of language, of form, of content, and the mix of these that gives it its particular identity. In a human being we'd call this personality.

What we hope is that readers will discover these particularities for themselves as they discuss a text. And this does happen far more often than inexperienced teachers suppose. Indeed, quite frequently child readers notice significant features which the adult hasn't. On these occasions they teach the teacher.

But sometimes the group needs help. Then the teacher must ask a 'special' question, one that helps move the conversation towards discovery of the features they haven't noticed so far.

Some examples:

1. 'How long do you think it took the story to happen?' Look back at the example on pages 57–8, when the teacher asks this question of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things*

Are. It is often a useful 'special' question because many stories for children make a significant, thematic use of time. Discovering how it affects the events and characters in the story reveals a lot about the underlying meaning of the text. Ask it of the picture book *Granpa* by John Burningham, the poem 'My Mother Saw a Dancing Bear' by Charles Causley, the novels *The Crane* by Reiner Zimnik, *Playing Beattie Bow* by Ruth Park, *Slake's Limbo* by Felice Holman, or *I Am the Cheese* by Robert Cormier, and in each case different kinds of textual 'clues' will very quickly be found.

2. 'Whose story is this?' Asked, for example, about Philippa Pearce's *The Battle of Bubble and Squeak*, nine- to eleven-year-olds find themselves discovering that the story is almost exactly shared half and half between Sid, who wants to keep the gerbils, and his mother Alice Sparrow, who does not. This leads them to consider in a different way the social relationships hidden at the heart of the narrative.

3. 'Which character interested you the most?' is a related question. It highlights differing views among the readers about people and how they behave. I have in mind a discussion in which a group of students were telling me about the characters in *The Battle of Bubble and Squeak*. After a while a male student, who hadn't yet spoken, said, 'Nobody's mentioned Bill, the stepfather. He's the character that interests me the most.' The student went on to tell us that he had a stepfather and explained, as he understood it from personal experience (world-to-text), the role of the stepfather in the story, how the story would have been different if the stepfather had been the children's natural father, how delicate a path a stepfather has to tread between supporting the mother and yet helping the children. What he told us shifted our view of the book, made us attentive to ideas and realities we hadn't thought about: to the way it handles the assumed rights of children and of parents, the way it lets us see into the mind of Alice Sparrow when children's novels often keep the private lives of adults secret from their readers. The story seemed much deeper afterwards, fuller, richer, more valuable.

4. 'Where did the story happen?' highlights the importance of place in a story. The peculiarities of the setting of *Slake's Limbo* have both plot and symbolic significance; the story wouldn't be at all the same if it were set in, say, a hut in open country. In contrast, many of Betsy Byars's stories don't rely so much on place; most of them might equally well happen in any suburban setting. My own children's novel *The Present Takers* is set in a particular town and school, but they don't have any special significance; I just happen to prefer using real-life settings for my stories. However, the companion novel *Seal Secret* is tied to its setting, and the key places – holiday cottage on a Welsh farm, cave on the seashore, and uninhabited island just off shore – add symbolism to the simple plot. So asking this question of *The Present Takers* wouldn't add much to the talk, whereas asking it of *Seal Secret* would be productive.

This is the dilemma of the special questions for the teacher. The basic and general questions can be used with any text. It is easy to judge as the talk develops which are worth asking or pursuing on each occasion. But not all the special questions apply to every text; trying to answer inappropriate questions may even put off the readers altogether. The teacher needs to have prepared herself beforehand, thinking out which special questions are relevant. With experience the teacher very quickly develops an understanding of which questions to ask and when to ask them. It's a skill that comes with practice.

THE FRAMEWORK

WARNING. The 'Tell me' approach is *not* a mechanical textbook programme. It is *not* intended that readers of any age should be given lists of questions and be required to answer them one after another either in speech or in writing.

The following list is intended solely for the teacher's own convenience and should not even be shown to students. It is provided only as an aid to memory. It is not meant to be slavishly followed. Questions should be rephrased to suit the readers involved.

The 'main' question, printed in italics, is followed by subsidiary or follow-on questions. Throughout, the word 'book' is used in place of story, poem, or whatever other more specific name applies to the text in hand.

TELL ME . . .
THE BASIC QUESTIONS

Was there anything you liked about this book?
What especially caught your attention?
What would you have liked more of?

Was there anything you disliked?
Were there parts that bored you?
Did you skip parts? Which ones?
If you gave up, where did you stop and what stopped you?

Was there anything that puzzled you?
Was there anything you thought strange?
Was there anything that you'd never found in a book before?
Was there anything that took you completely by surprise?
Did you notice any apparent inconsistencies?

Were there any patterns – any connections – that you noticed?

THE GENERAL QUESTIONS

When you first saw the book, even before you read it, what kind of book did you think it was going to be?
What made you think this?
Now you've read it, is it as you expected?

Have you read other books like this one?
How is this one the same?
How is it different?

Have you read this book before? [If so] Was it different this time?
Did you notice anything this time that you didn't notice the first time?
Did you enjoy it more or less?
Because of what happened to you when reading it again, would you recommend other people to read it more than once, or isn't it worth it?

While you were reading, or now when you think about it, were there words or phrases or other things to do with the language that you liked? Or didn't like?

You know how, when people speak, they often use some words or phrases or talk in a way that you recognize as theirs: are some words or phrases used like that in this book? Have you noticed anything special about the way language is used in this book?

If the writer asked you what could be improved in the book, what would you say?

[Alternatively] If you had written this book, how would you have made it better?

Has anything that happens in this book ever happened to you?

In what ways was it the same or different for you?

Which parts in the book seem to you to be most true-to-life?

Did the book make you think differently about your own similar experience?

When you were reading, did you 'see' the story happening in your imagination?

Which details – which passages – helped you 'see' it best?

Which passages stay in your mind most vividly?

How many different stories [kinds of story] can you find in this story? Was this a book you read quickly, or slowly? In one go, or in separate sessions?

Would you like to read it again?

What will you tell your friends about this book?

What won't you tell them because it might spoil the book for them? Or might mislead them about what it is like?

Do you know people who you think would especially like it?

What would you suggest I tell other people about it that will help them decide whether they want to read it or not?

Which people would be the ones who should read it? Older than you? Younger?

How should I give it to them? For example, should I read it aloud or tell them about it and let them read it for themselves?

Is it a good thing to talk about it after we've all read it?

We've listened to each other's thoughts and heard all sorts of things that each of us has noticed. Are you surprised by anything someone else said?

Has anyone said anything that has changed your mind in any way about this book? Or helped you understand it better?

Tell me about the things people said that struck you the most.

When you think about the book now, after all we've said, what is the most important thing about it for you?

Does anyone know anything about the writer? Or about how the story came to be written? Or where? Or when? Would you like to find out?

THE SPECIAL QUESTIONS

How long did it take the story to happen?

Did we find out about the story in the order in which the events actually happened?

When you talk about things that happen to you, do you always tell your story in the order in which they happened? Or are there sometimes reasons why you don't?

What are the reasons?

Are there parts of the story that took a long time to happen but were told about quickly or in a few words? And are there parts that happened very quickly but took a lot of space to tell about?

Were there parts that took the same time to tell as they would have taken to happen?

Where did the story happen?

Did it matter where it was set? Could it just as well have been set anywhere? Or could it have been better set somewhere else?

Did you think about the place as you were reading? Are there passages in the book that are especially about the place where the story is set? What did you like, or dislike, about them?

Was the setting interesting in itself? Would you like to know more about it?

Which character interested you the most?

Is that character the most important in the story? Or is it really about someone else?
Which character(s) didn't you like?
Did any of the characters remind you of people you know? Or remind you of characters in other books?

Was there anyone who doesn't appear in the story but without whom it couldn't have happened?
Can you think of any reason why s/he doesn't appear?
Would the story have been different if s/he had appeared?

Who was telling – who was narrating – the story? Do we know? And how do we know?

Is the story told in the first person (and if so, who is this person)? Or the third person? By someone we know about in the story, or by someone we know or don't know about outside the story?
What does the person telling the story – the narrator – think or feel about the characters? Does s/he like or dislike them? How do you know?
Does the narrator approve or disapprove of the things that happen and that the characters do? Do you approve or disapprove of them?

Think of yourself as a spectator. With whose eyes did you see the story? Did you only see what one character in the story saw, or did you see things sometimes as one character saw them, and sometimes as another, and so on?
Were you, as it were, inside the head of one of the characters, only knowing what s/he knew, or did the story take you inside a number of characters?

Did we ever get to know what the characters were thinking about? Were we ever told what they were feeling? Or was the story told all the time from outside the characters, watching what they did and hearing what they said, but never really knowing what they were thinking or feeling?
When you were reading the story, did you feel it was happening now? Or did you feel it was happening in the past and being remembered? Can you tell me anything in the writing that made you feel like that?

Did you feel as if everything was happening to you, as if you were one of the characters? Or did you feel as if you were an observer, watching what was happening but not part of the action?

If you were an observer, where were you watching from? Did you seem to watch from different places – sometimes, perhaps, from beside the characters, sometimes from above them as if you were in a helicopter? Can you tell me places in the book where you felt like that?

*

This is a long list, so let me repeat: it is not intended that every question should be asked every time. Nor that the selected questions should be doggedly plodded through in the order set out here.

Our experience of using the 'Tell me' approach constantly is that after a while the Framework sinks into the back of the mind; then we don't consciously use it. We begin to listen more attentively to the questions children generate themselves – and use those as springboards.

'It makes the whole book discussion much more open-ended,' noted Jan Maxwell, 'and gives far greater scope for the development and expression of the children's own ideas and feelings.'

Anna Collins wrote, 'It gives a greater feeling of confidence. But I haven't used [the Framework] verbatim. Rather, it shapes my thoughts and points me to what I'm listening for.'

Steve Bicknell added, 'Each time we talked about a book I found I needed to refer to the Framework less and less frequently. I didn't need notes by my side. I also became aware that certain questions did not need to be put – the children started the discussions themselves, usually talking about likes, dislikes and boredom.'

15 · Scenes from 'Tell me' in Action

I first intended to reproduce here a full transcript of a 'Tell me' session, but observing teachers at work and listening to audiotapes made by others showed me how, as soon as teachers have accustomed themselves to it, they make the approach their own by adapting it to suit their own style and the children they work with. Some sessions begin with variations on the basic questions. Quite rightly, teachers allow the talk to follow paths suggested by the children's comments and responses; they find special questions more precisely suited to the book in hand than any of those in the Framework, and so on. In short, in experienced hands there is no standard 'Tell me' session. So instead of one full-scale session, here are scenes which provide glimpses of teachers and pupils enjoying coductive 'Tell me'-based booktalk.

You may now want to reread the transcript examples of sessions in action included in Chapter 6, pages 36–7, where we see a learner teacher at work, and in Chapter 10, pages 54–7, where Mary Sutcliffe helps her children talk about *The Stone Book*, and analyse them in the light of what you've since read about the approach.

Beginners all

Eileen Langley was teaching a reception class of children aged five years to five years eight months when she first tried a 'Tell me' session. Most of the children had been with her for four months, about one third of them for a month. They were used to being gathered together in the reading corner at the start of the day and Eileen telling them nursery rhymes and reading them stories. But so far they had never been expected to talk about their reading other than informally. This is Eileen's record of her first 'Tell me' experiences.

One Monday morning I showed my class *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak. They were sitting happily on the carpet expecting a nursery rhyme session. When I showed the book, several children got up on their knees in their eagerness to have a closer look. Several unprompted comments followed: 'A monster book', 'Look how big the monster is', 'He's too big to go in that boat'. One little boy grasped my ankle and said, 'That monster has feet just like our feet'. Someone else wondered why there was a ladder on the boat. I found it interesting that apart from Ryan, who kept a firm hold on my ankle, their attention was moving to the boat. 'Is it a story about a boat?'

I opened the book so that they could see the complete [wrap-round] cover and Emma decided that it was night in the book and the monster was asleep. As I showed them the inside title page, Philip pointed out that there was a mummy and a daddy monster. These children, having just started school, were bringing their own experiences to the book [*world-to-text*], and the picture that they see as a mummy and daddy monster is a very reassuring one, irrespective of the fact that it is a monster family. Another child informed me that the mummy monster was the one without the horns. The fact that the children were not frightened confirms Sendak's insight into children's minds.

The children had become quite excited but silence fell once I started reading, and they studied the pictures with avid interest. When I had finished the story, several children asked to see the pictures again and I showed them, wishing that we had several copies of the book. The rumpus pages were top favourites. Lisa said that the monsters were having a disco. James said that his big brother had been to a disco and that these pictures looked like very noisy pictures.

I asked what they liked best. 'The rumpus' was constantly repeated. Kate said that she liked these words best: '. . . they roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws'. These words have featured a lot in their language since then. When a normally very placid group were making too much noise in the Wendy house recently, I was assured that they were only having a rumpus! Neil, who is a very quiet child with a slight speech problem, volunteered that he liked Max

in his private boat best.

Michelle said she was puzzled by the forest growing in Max's bedroom. We had to sidetrack here as some children obviously did not understand what Michelle meant by being puzzled. After a short discussion they appeared to have grasped the meaning. Several children decided that they were puzzled when Max went sailing in such a little boat across the ocean. Others couldn't understand why he didn't remain and continue to be king of the wild things. Alan was puzzled by the wild things because of their strange hair. James interrupted: 'They might not be true.' I asked if he thought they were true. 'No,' he replied very firmly.

Teacher: Do you think Max is true?
James: Yes, but the wild things are not.
Teacher: How can that be?
James: Max just made up the wild things.

Lisa interrupted to say that the wild things must be real as they had skin on their feet.

I decided to move on and leave these ideas to float for a while. We discussed patterns in the story. Daniel, who has a rather forceful personality and who had remarked more than once that he would like to be Max, said, 'Max's mother put Max to bed without any supper and Max put the wild things to bed without their supper.' Philip, who had been very quiet, astounded most of the children by saying, 'I don't think Max really went to where the wild things are.'

Teacher: Where do you think he went?
Philip: I think Max had a dream.
James (immediately): That's true, Philip. That's what I think.

A few of the children were still unsure, but Philip had certainly enabled the majority to think as he did. A discussion on dreams followed, which I allowed to continue to let the children deliberate on the idea and on their own dreams. Friendly monsters appeared to feature in most dreams!

The children have requested this story on numerous occasions. I have read other Sendak stories to them but this remains their favourite. Parents have come in to check the title in order to buy the book as their child has talked about

it so much at home. Other parents have come to tell me that when in the local library their child has picked this book and can read it . . .

When I read a story with my class, I always tell them who wrote and illustrated the book. The word 'illustrator' fascinates these young children and they love using it. Emma asked if Maurice Sendak had written and illustrated other books. I showed her *In the Night Kitchen* and *Outside Over There*. Obviously she spread the news as after playtime I was asked to read *In the Night Kitchen*.

They listened and watched very attentively. Their faces reflected the immense pleasure they were getting from the story. They were very eager to tell me what they liked best. Alan was adamant that Mickey in the helicopter was what he liked best. Another child said, 'I also like the little helicopter which is hanging over his bed at the beginning of the story.' Others chorused that they liked when Mickey dived to the bottom of the milk. James interrupted to say he didn't like Mickey when he is out of his clothes. James is very reluctant to change his clothes for games, so I was not surprised when he said this. Lisa commented that she liked lots of the words: 'Thump, dump, blump, hump, bump. I like the sounds of these words,' she said and kept repeating them.

Andrew commented that Mickey was in bed at the beginning of the story and at the end of the story.

Teacher: Where do you think the story happened?
Andrew: In Mickey's bedroom.
Teacher: Does the story remind you of any other story?
Lisa: *Where the Wild Things Are*.
Teacher: Why? [*]
Lisa: Max is in his bedroom before his journey and at the end of the story he is in bed.
Teacher: Do you think all of this really happened to Mickey?
Lisa: No.
Teacher: How do you know?
Lisa: Because when I watched television the ducks talked and ducks can't really talk.
Teacher: So what do you think Mickey was doing?
Lisa: He was dreaming in bed.

Chorus: Yes, because he was in bed at the beginning of the story and at the end of the story . . .

The children were now capable, I felt, of having a longer story. I decided to read *The Elephant and the Bad Baby* by Elfrida Vipont, illustrated by Raymond Briggs . . .

The first comment when I had finished reading came from Philip. 'I thought the elephant would be too big to go into the house. He is very big beside the houses at the front of the book.' Emma interrupted, 'I'm very puzzled by the elephant. He should be at the zoo. I saw an elephant at the zoo.' Melanie suggested that perhaps there were patio doors on the bad baby's house. We turned to the pages where the elephant is seated at the table with everyone else, having tea. The children were fascinated and very amused by this doublespread. Ryan grasped the word 'doublespread' and asked to see all the doublespread pictures again. The firm favourite was when the elephant sat down in the middle of the road and the bad baby fell off. The elephant was the most popular character and the bad baby did not merit any sympathy. Melanie didn't like when they all went in to tea. When I queried this, she said, 'I just wanted the story to keep going rumpeta rumpeta all down the road.' The very young children were carried along by the powerful storyline and the commanding illustrations.

Vicky said there was a pattern because the elephant went rumpeta rumpeta rumpeta on every page till the elephant sat down. Lorraine said that the elephant asked the baby a question on every page and the baby always replied 'Yes' on every page till the elephant sat down. Michelle commented that there was a pattern like that in *Good-night Owl!* [by Pat Hutchins], which I had read a few days earlier. 'On nearly every page it says "And Owl tried to sleep".' I was pleased that my five-year-old children were beginning to mention other books in the course of discussing a new book, and that they offered comments at the end of each story instead of me having to prod for answers. As soon as we finish a book they volunteer their likes, dislikes, what patterns they have noticed and what puzzles them. (Incidentally, *The Elephant and the Bad Baby* triggered off a wave of good manners in my classroom. Never before had so many 'pleases' been uttered!)

Connecting with *The Crane*

At the start of her 'Tell me' booktalk, Jan Maxwell stuck fairly closely to the standard 'Tell me' approach, which is why I've included these extracts from the transcript of an hour-long session. The segments include samples from the beginning of the talk, then passages from the moment when straightforward reporting of likes and dislikes shifted into a phase of puzzle-sharing, and finally a section from the middle of the session when they struggled to find patterns and connections.

There were twenty-three nine-year-olds in the group. The book they talked about was *The Crane* by Reiner Zimnik. Jan set the scene in a prefatory note to the transcript:

> I read from the hardback edition, showing the children the whole book before we started and all the graphics [illustrations, facsimiles of telegrams, handwritten passages, etc.] before we had any discussion, which was not our normal practice, and the children, I felt, found this rather strange; there were occasions when I specifically had to stop them commenting and questioning. I had hoped to read the story within a complete week, a passage each day, but unfortunately we were interrupted and the reading wasn't finished until the second week.
>
> We held our discussion the day after I finished reading and we sat, uncharacteristically, on chairs, in a circle by the chalkboard. This is something I would *not* do again – it made the whole thing too formal and opened up a rather forbidding space between us. For my own reference I tape-recorded the discussion, but wish in retrospect that I had made notes as well – I relied too much on the recording to act as my memory.
>
> I followed the Framework by using the questions:
>
> 1. What did you first notice about the book?
> 2. Which parts did you like?
> 3. Which parts puzzled you?
> 4. Did you notice any patterns/links?
>
> These questions followed naturally from one another so that I omitted the questions about boring parts and parts the children did not like.
>
> The second question produced certain concrete

incidents as most popular but then led to the question of the silver lion and the crane driver's dream (not linked together). These two incidents/characters had also aroused the greatest degree of puzzlement. The crane driver's dream in particular dominated the conversation for a long time and led the children to consider the nature of the relationships between the crane driver and Lektro, and the crane driver and the eagle. Some of the children became bogged down with the idea that Lektro had changed into the eagle, others thought that Lektro's spirit had entered into the eagle. The dream was obviously a very significant event, and led quite naturally into a search for links and patterns. Here the children linked the silver lion with something good and the ravens, sharks and rider of death with something evil.

We talked for nearly an hour and could have gone on if lunchtime had not intervened. A total of fifteen children out of twenty-three made contributions, all of them thoughtful and relevant. Had we been sitting in our normal informal group, I think more children would have talked.

In transcribing Jan's tape, I have not noted hesitations and false starts; and sometimes the tape is indecipherable where outside noise broke through. Throughout, however, one of the things that impressed me was the clarity and assurance of the children's speech, a tribute to Jan's teaching. No child was required to talk; Jan picked out the next speaker from those indicating they were ready. (I've omitted her naming of the next speaker in order to save space.)

Jan: I want to . . . See if you can remember, and tell me what you thought when you first saw the book.

Clare: It looked quite good but it seems a sort of boy's book, and the pictures on the front . . . it looked interesting and when we got a little way into it I began to think, 'Oh this is a children's story'.

Timothy: Well, I thought it was all about a crane and how they build it and what they used to build it and things, and so I thought it would be quite boring.

Daniel: At the beginning it seemed like they were going to

take a really long time to build the crane and then they were going to make the adventures . . . [Indecipherable.]

Nicholas: I thought it was just going to be on building the crane. [Tracey speaks: indecipherable.]

Richard: Well, when I first saw it I thought it was going to be all about the building of the crane and all about the loading of the crane. The crane loading things into ships and how the actual place built up into a famous place.

Helen: I thought it was going to be quite boring. [It is generally agreed that these expectations were the ones shared by everyone.]

Jan: Tell me about which bits you liked.

Timothy: It was when he was lifting the town councillors across the river and he was shaking them about. And they all had bacon and egg for lunch.

Emma: I liked it when they had finished the flood and the animals started to come again.

Jan: Did you? Yes. Clare.

Clare: I'll tell you what I thought it was like at the beginning. It was quite nice, then it . . . I think the bit where I began to really get interested in it was where the crane driver actually put the splints made of fish bone in the eagle's broken wing. Then when they found out the man in the potato field and when he actually came down with a sack of potatoes. I thought that was the best bit.

Peter: I think it was quite good when the elephant had sunstroke. He was running about . . . [laughter] . . . and the crane picked him up and dipped him in and out of the water to calm him down.

Jan: Yes. What a lot of different bits, aren't there? . . .

So the talk proceeds, increasing in pace and enthusiasm as other speakers mention the eagle, Lektro, Lektro and the silver lion, and the little fishes swimming through holes in the shark. In talking about their expectations and about the things they liked, the children had already offered cues for considering the main features of the book: its comic, surreal quality; and the formal relationships between such elements

as dream and 'reality', or the characters in the story and symbolically dramatic presences like the silver lion. Jan doesn't pick these up straightaway, however. She leaves them alone, till the children rediscover them later. The rediscovery begins when Timothy fastens on Nathan's mention of the little fishes swimming through the shark.

Timothy: I like it the same as Nathan because it seems a bit strange and I think that's the bit that I think makes me like the story.

In other words, it is 'strangeness', difference, the unfamiliar that Timothy and Nathan fix on as being most enjoyable – the very quality that many teachers say children shy away from and don't like.

Immediately the idea of strangeness is taken up. Jan allows this reportage to continue for five or six minutes before she asks if there were things they didn't like. Clare says she didn't like the crane driver's salary, as it wasn't fair! Timothy didn't like it when Lektro kept appearing and disappearing while talking to the crane driver (another of the dream elements). This leads to a discussion that Jan finally sums up.

Jan: Timothy said it was unfair when Lektro kept appearing and then going away again. Clare said she thinks that was a dream, and Tracey said that she thinks it did mention something about a dream. Timothy said it couldn't have been a dream because he didn't go to sleep. What do the rest of you think?

There follows a period of hesitation. It is as if no one quite knows what to say next. An anxious or inexperienced teacher might change tack at this point, returning to more secure subjects. But Jan waits, allowing everyone time for thought, while a few comments are made of no apparent importance. Her patience is rewarded by an unidentified boy who suddenly interrupts the subdued flow:

Boy: I just realized that since Lektro died he could have been a spirit.

Jan: Mm ... yes ... Had you forgotten that he'd died?

Boy: Yes.

This remembering causes Clare, in a passage too damaged by extraneous noise for accurate transcription, to suggest that the eagle and the silver lion might also be spirits. She suggests that because the eagle appears at the time Lektro is appearing and disappearing, the eagle might be Lektro's spirit.

They talk about this, eventually returning to the text in order to establish the precise order and relationship of events. Jan reads the key passage out. They discuss it, puzzling out a resolution to the problem of the eagle's true identity. This becomes so difficult that they begin to talk again about parts they didn't like: in other words, they concentrate on difficulty, and do so by constantly referring to what the text actually says. All sorts of suggestions are made. Jan gives consideration to all of them.

A head of steam builds up that inevitably leads to a desire for some meaningful connection between these so far unconnected elements. Jan waits for this moment to arrive, which eventually it does in this way:

Richard: I didn't like the part where the ravens were laughing. The ravens were always cruel and they were always jealous of the crane driver.

Jan: They were, weren't they? Yes. Roger.

Roger: This may sound silly but when they were laughing at the crane driver they might have changed into the sharks to try and knock down the crane.

Jan: That just reminded me of another question I was going to ask you, and I think that all this fits together somehow. I was going to ask you this question . . . Remember when we were doing our work about patterns, and I read you fairy stories, and we were looking for patterns in the stories? Now I was going to ask you if you can see patterns . . . or connections . . . in this book? Can you think of things that make a kind of pattern? Now, I think from what Roger has said I have just begun to see the beginning of a pattern. I think, I'm not sure, because I'm trying to work this out

the same as you are. And I think I can begin to see a pattern that says . . . [writing on the board] . . . RAVENS . . . [Indecipherable.]

Children: Sharks!

Jan: [writing] SHARKS. Ravens and sharks . . .

Jan has led them a little here. Perhaps she felt it was necessary to help them. At any rate, they quickly pick up the idea, struggle for a time with the misstep first taken by Clare's association of the eagle with Lektro's spirit, but gradually build up a pattern that groups Lektro and the eagle with good and the ravens and sharks with evil. This is tidied up and resolved in this way:

Jan: Does the silver lion make a kind of pattern?

Children: A bit!

Jan: A bit! Yes. How?

Clare: Well, the river pirates are bad and the silver lion is good.

Jan: [at the board] So the silver lion fits into this bit, with Lektro and the eagle, all the good things, doesn't he? So he was good. And we've got the . . . on the bad, we've got the ravens, the sharks, and death – the figure of death – [Overtalking.]

Jan: Now we've got three things on each side. The ravens, the sharks and the figure of death. And here we've got Lektro and eagle and silver lion. Now, can we see a connection between any of those? I'm beginning to see things, I think. [Pause.]

Richard: Well, obviously, you could say the ravens and Lektro go together, silver lion can be maybe a spirit, and death must be a sort of spirit, so silver lion and death can go together.

Jan: That's quite interesting, because that's what I was thinking. Certainly, silver lion and death are kinds of spirit. Where the other things are real things, silver lion and the figure of death are not real, are they, somehow?

Children: No!

Jan: So they have a different sort of meaning from the others, don't they? Because death comes along

when war is coming and . . . silver lion comes in more than once, doesn't he?

Children: Yes!

Clare: So does the figure of death, because he comes along before the war but comes after.

Jan: That's right, Clare, he does. He does indeed! Silver lion comes when?

Daniel: [Indecipherable.]

Jan: Yes. Let's try and think of the times when silver lion comes. He comes before the war, on the landing. Can you remember exactly when?

A boy: Was it after the crane driver had been helping the circus people with the animals?

Jan: Yes, it was.

Children: Yes! [They sort this out precisely, listing the lion's appearances.]

A narrative pattern is being discovered and reconstructed. The class is within range of a recuperation of meaning, and in the final part of the session they begin sorting this out. Quite obviously, from the time Jan first mentioned the ravens, it is possible to see that she has a critical direction in mind. To some extent she is setting the agenda. As she became more experienced with the approach, she learned how to hold back, allowing the children to shape the discourse much more.

Jan admired *The Crane* very much and wanted her pupils to enjoy it as much as she did. When this is so, it is hard for the teacher to remain neutral; and sometimes (as I believe it was in this instance) it is right for her to help the children find a line of thought that is productive. Unquestionably, I know from the results of this session, the children learned a great deal not only about this book but about how to enter a book of an unfamiliar kind, how to question it and how to enjoy its unusual tune. And, apart from anything else, one can hear on the tape the children's unflagging enthusiasm and their keenness to take part in the discussion.

AN INTIMATE DIARY OF READING IN PROGRESS

Liz Tansley usually taught infant-aged children. As a change she had one year with a class of seven- to nine-year-olds,

which she team-taught with a colleague who looked after a parallel set in an open-plan area. During this time Liz started practising 'Tell me'. When she began, she was reading Cynthia Harnett's *The Wool-Pack* to her pupils, following it with *Sun Horse, Moon Horse* by Rosemary Sutcliff. Her booktalk sessions developed during readings of *The Eighteenth Emergency* by Betsy Byars and my novel *The Present Takers*. So far she had followed the plan of asking basic questions, establishing the highlighting agenda, and introducing special questions as she thought necessary. The children had done well and were soon used to this way of talking. Now she wanted to move on, to improvise more, give herself and her pupils a challenging text and plenty of opportunity to explore their reading of it. She chose *Slake's Limbo* by Felice Holman, a book I'd have thought perhaps better left for a year or two later, but which she decided would extend them without loss of pleasure.

So that she could reflect on what she did and have a record she could give to me, Liz kept a diary of each session. The result is a narrative account of a highly skilled teacher practising the art of her profession with great sensitivity and self-critical insight. Her handling of the book, the class and the 'Tell me' talk is subtle, complex and in many ways idiosyncratic. The analytic comments in square brackets are mine.

Monday, March 10. For a change I have decided to read only to my own set, and we begin with *Slake's Limbo* today. I started by saying that it was an important book, which needs a lot of thinking about, and that it is one that I have enjoyed very much. I deliberately didn't say we might find a connection with what we had recently been listening to, as I had done with *The Eighteenth Emergency* in relation to *The Present Takers*.

My general demeanour was serious, so the atmosphere was expectant but quiet and sober.

The only background I gave was a quick reference to [New York] subways and the [London] Underground, which most of the children at least knew about even if they had not been on it. 'Elevated' and 'wily' I remember I had to explain. No one could approach 'wily' until I brought in 'wily as a –', and then one child said 'fox'. I hope I remember to go back

to this as an indicator to Slake's character and condition.

I read, in two sessions of about twenty minutes, up to the point where Slake escapes into the subway for the 'one hundred and twenty-one days'. I repeated that phrase when I stopped, closing the book (they always find that a quite dramatic gesture if you do it with deliberation), and there was a general releasing of breath. They immediately wanted to know more about this length of time and didn't turn their thoughts to how Slake would survive or the actual act of running away from home.

I then said, 'What would you do if you had had a bad day, or a horrible experience, or felt the world was against you, where would you go?' [*An invitation to bring their world to the text.*] To which they replied in unison, 'Home.' An immediate difference between themselves and Slake was appreciated by them, and this response shows that my age-group children are still very much attached to home as the haven, and the only one, which might not be the case as children get older. I'm thinking here of an adolescent who may be more inclined to share problems with peer group friends first, rather than the home.

So I already know that a bond of interest has been forged with the book, and from their facial expresssions I could see that they were feeling a reaction that was mixed. They were both astounded at the predicament Slake had landed himself in, and sympathetic, tinged with awe at his daring.

When I asked why Slake had not chosen to go home, they were right on the ball concerning his distressing background. I asked for 'evidence' [*How do you know that?*] – they love this word. I think it may have to do with the fact that in the infants we often talk about being a detective when reading. They noted the 'kind of aunt', being 'slapped', the sleeping conditions, and the 'scraps' of food. The Americanisms in the language didn't get in their way at all. I'm always surprised at how little, if any, comment I get about the formal school set-up which is evident in all three books in this series of readings. It is so different from the experience they have had. School must have a kind of universal concept for them that allows them to accept any model.

Tuesday, March 11. I could only give one home-base session to

the story today. We read chapter two and 'On Another Track'. I simply said, 'One hundred and twenty-one days' and went straight in.

I left phrases such as 'A phalanx of leaping weight on the hoof' and 'other fortuitous circumstances' in the flow of the narrative, but I gestured with my hands the flight of Slake from the gang and mimed the 'snaking' of his body through the gap into the cave.

When we turned the page and came upon 'On Another Track', I turned the book towards the children and drew their attention to the difference in typography. They noted the darker [semi-bold sans-serif] print and the fact that there was a title rather than a number for a chapter. I asked, rhetorically, why the book had this change, what purpose it served, and got a general 'Hmm' from the children. I wonder what they will make of this part of the structure as the story develops.

When I closed the book, I pursued a reaction to the knowledge they have acquired so far, concerning what is really happening at a deep level. I asked, 'What are we being shown so far? What ideas are coming out of the book?' Silence. So I added, 'Are we just finding out things that happen, or are there any important ideas that are coming into your mind?' [*What kind of story is this? How are we meant to 'read' it?*] Silence again, but accompanied by downward glances (always a sure sign that something is going on), and fingers on lips. Pushing further, I asked James if he remembered the word he used in describing *The Present Takers*. He did – the word was 'emotional'. [*The experience of previous reading being brought to the aid of interpretation of an unfamiliar text. It works, releasing new ideas.*] Once he said that, there was more thinking, and then another boy came up with the word 'sight'. I reacted with surprise and pleasure, saying I had not thought of that, and that we would follow the idea through. Right away two children came up with the reference to Willis Joe dreaming of driving sheep in Australia, and to Slake, quoting 'he walked a dreamer'. A younger child (Hannah) added the fact of Slake's short-sightedness, followed by another child saying the [Underground] tunnel was dark and Slake couldn't see very well in there. At this moment I thought it right to help them articulate the sense of

what they were moving towards [*the teacher sums up*], and said it seemed we were saying that there was a connection between Slake's actual poor sight and his 'seeing' in his dreams, and that Willis Joe also was able to dream of other places and have feelings that were not to do with his job.

I then asked whether the word 'horizons' fitted in anywhere. This was beyond them, so I gave an explanation of the word and said I thought the idea of Slake and Willis Joe dreaming of spaces and places with long vistas was of some importance when we knew city skyscrapers and tunnels shut out light and views, hoping I had added to their 'sight' repertoire.

It pleased and reassured me to get the response of 'sight'. I had expected the whole thing of tunnels and underground to be uppermost in their minds. I know I had read with emphasis whenever underground was in the text. Yet again the children's independence in assimilation and reaction to a text came through. Confidence in the children's ability is a most important factor in booktalk. That is, that they will not simply regurgitate what the teacher thinks she has planted in their minds.

Thursday, March 13. Home-base at the end of the day. The children were tired and I will read at the start of the day tomorrow. A quick recap, based on 'Slake knew he was in business'. The next part of the story is about the development of Slake's newspaper business [he collects used papers left behind by passengers in the station, smooths them out and sells them again to people too rushed to call at the newspaper shop]. Although the word crime is used, I think from the giggles the children viewed his action as naughtiness. They liked all the part about Slake making his bed out of leftover papers, appealing probably to this age group's delight in making dens and general 'pretend' environments.

Just before Slake gets back into his cave there is a sentence, 'Slake was –'; the children provided the word 'home' as I looked up.

We then came to 'On Another Track'. The book was turned towards the children and there was recognition of the same title and print as before. The surprise was at the short length, only one page. One boy, Stephen, said something

like he thought the author was trying to tell us something. [*The book-as-object being used as a clue to meaning.*] I said, 'Well done' and asked if he could explain a bit more. He was struggling with an abstract thought, having gleaned a generalized idea of some of the 'thinking about books' vocabulary we are trying to build up. What was pleasing was his confidence in speaking like this within the group. [*Everything is honourably reportable.*] He is one of the youngest and had not attempted to lead a new line of thought for the group to consider before.

I said, 'Something's going on in these bits' and read it. I thought this part was over their heads, so I turned the page, again turned the book round, to have them say, 'Back to a number for a chapter'.

Time was late, but I decided to read quickly into the next chapter to keep the flow going after the last difficult part. But this was where the talk came. It's the passage where the two 'regular customers' are introduced. Several of the children were convinced it was reasonable to think the 'turbaned man' might be Willis Joe and that he might meet Slake again and rescue him. I reacted with less than enthusiasm but my grimaces and 'Pardon?' were overruled in their excitement at thinking they were solving the problem of what happens next. I resolved that with a limp 'Well, we shall see'. When some children took my hint an argument broke out, involving such points as 'How could Willis Joe be buying a paper when *he* came to the station to work?', answered by 'He could buy a paper before he started work', answered by 'But this station would be part of his work', countered by 'Today could be his day off', and 'Anyway, he smiled at Slake'. I didn't think I stood much chance, so I left it at that.

Thinking about what you once said about key children exerting influence within a group and shaping general responses, I know I rely on Dean, Katiana, James Bro., and Matthew from the second years, and Hannah, Tom, and John from the first years.

Dean is a very mature and great reader. He always buys or borrows the books we read together. We only started this book on Monday. He was away Tuesday, so on Wednesday read up what he had missed. He informed me today that he'd borrowed this book from the public library and had got up at

seven o'clock this morning and says he finished it! He is pivotal in my group and also when the two sets share a story together. He is physically big and generally able, popular, and so a model for other children, especially the boys. We all look out for when Dean murmurs, 'Oh, this is a good bit'.

Friday, March 14. Pages 35 to 42. Just flicking through the pages I came upon 'From then on the cave was lit', when Slake gets the lamp. Here is a perfect example of the way in which the give and take between teacher and children works. My mind went back to the talk about 'sight'. I had not noticed the sight and light imagery and metaphors when I read it myself. I now see the connection with the references in 'On Another Track', just preceding chapter five, to Willis Joe's soul and, by implication, Slake's, and beyond that, ours. Again, for me the links with traditional Christian imagery are strong.

We read *Slake* first thing in the morning, when the children were alert. I reminded them that we had begun chapter five and that Slake now had 'two regular customers'. I read to the end of chapter five, turning the book towards them to show them the graffiti and how they were typed, and also the use of a series of dots, as in the final sentence, 'Slake's expectations for good were not great . . . were not great . . . were not . . .'

I stopped for a short time when we came to the part about Slake looking out of the carriage window 'as if there were sights to be seen on the dark concrete walls'. I sensed the children wanted to break in here; some leant forward and some started to raise their hands. They quickly connected with their 'sight' discussion yesterday and saw it in terms of dreaming. I think, hope, they are now incorporating the idea of day-dreaming as well as sleep-dreaming. I should try and establish if this is so.

When we came to the sentence 'He began to know the signs of the subway as a woodsman knows the wilderness . . .', I deliberately called their attention to it by repeating it. I noticed Rebecca's concentration had gone and reinforced my point by saying, 'You need to listen to this bit, Rebecca, I think you'll find it important.' [*Sometimes the teacher supplies energy when the student flags.*] We quickly defined wilderness

and moved on. [*The teacher helps by providing information the learner needs and doesn't have.*]

At the end of the chapter I asked, 'Is there anything you want to say now?' A lot of hands went up. I then got my notebook out, suggesting it would be a good idea to note down some of our ideas, as we were going to have a talking session with the other set in the morning. More hands went up, and, in the very short time we had left, these are some of the comments I managed to get down:

'He sees things on walls. It's like he's dreaming.'

'The dot dot dots is like it's fading away, it's pauses, it means it carries on.' (From three children.)

I looked up here and asked, 'Any important words for ideas in this chapter?'

Matthew: 'Exploration, because it connects with Willis Joe. And it's like with *The Eighteenth Emergency*, Mouse exploring to find Hammerman.'

Hannah: 'In all three stories the main character has been picked on.'

Rebecca (undoubtedly her attention had been regained because she attempted to quote): 'He knows the signs like he was a woodcutter in the wilderness.' Asked to add to that, she said, 'The gang boys are like wild boys.'

Stephen was triggered by Rebecca bringing in 'wilderness' and said, 'Slake's like a badger because at night he ducks into his tunnel.'

I raised my eyebrows at this and Stephen was immediately defended by another boy, who said badgers do go into their tunnels at night as well as in daytime.

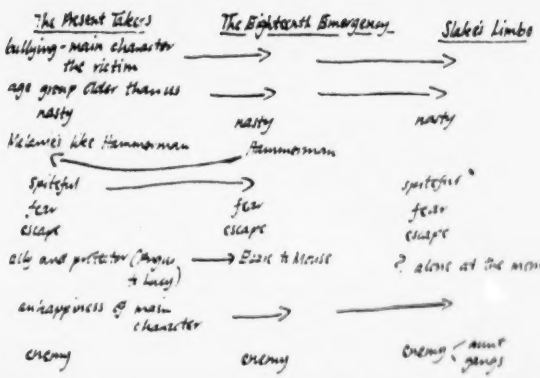
Neil: 'Getting food like in the wilderness.'

James Bro.: 'He's lost but not frightened.' (I thought this was a sensitive observation. James has the ability to get inside a character. It was he who said *The Present Takers* was an 'emotional book'.)

James triggered by Dean: 'The city's like wild because he has no friends.'

[*In these comments we see the use of intertextual references, a discovery of metaphoric meaning, the bringing of world to text to resolve a problem, and insight into character.*]

We had to stop there, but later in the morning I had both sets together for a talking session. The other set are hearing



the story from their own teacher. I said I wanted to use the board and try connecting the three books together. We hadn't done this before in quite such a definite way and there was great excitement from the children. There are over fifty when both sets are together but they never show signs of difficulty, listening well to each other and quite happy to agree with a 'yes' or dissent with a 'not really' if they don't get chosen to lead in with a response.

As usual I asked for [single] words, as this seems both easier for the children and also concentrates their minds on ideas rather than retelling the story, although they feel free to, and do, give a lengthy response if they wish. [*Everything is honourably reportable.*] Whatever I do put on the board, I always comment on it and ask for evidence from the text [*How do you know that?*], even if only fleetingly. This allows other children, rather than only the originator, to join in and expand what is being noted. [*Cooperative pooling of ideas.*] I gave them the word 'victim' after they had given 'bullying', and 'protector' after 'ally', as I thought this would increase understanding of the texts. [*Teacher as informant.*] I questioned their wanting to put 'ally' under *Slake's Limbo*. They quite rightly came up with Willis Joe, but I said I wondered if the book indeed had, as yet, given us any firm ideas that Willis Joe either could or would be some kind of friend or ally of Slake. [*Teacher returning readers to text.*] They decided a question mark be put instead. Thinking about it now, their logic was better than mine, as they obviously sense that Slake, going on the form of the

previous two books and many others already in their history, will, and must (to them) have an ally at some point. And as the book, and I, have made Willis Joe's place in it important, and so far he has been presented in an interesting, non-threatening light, the children were making a judgement based on reason and feeling and previous reading experience.

[*From this point on I don't provide further analytic glosses, hoping that by now you will be sufficiently familiar with the approach confidently to provide your own.*]

Monday, March 17. Only time for a short session at morning home-base time. Much of it was taken up with whose parents were allowing their children to go on the 'Litter Blitz' later that day. As a result, we only got through the first four pages of chapter six. This took us up to the point where Slake feels threatened by the 'turbaned man' questioning him about his newspaper business. There was no time for discussion, but the children were worried about Slake.

At the very end of the day, in the last ten minutes, I was able to go back to what we had heard and to ask for comments. No sign of enthusiasm – it was hot and we were all tired, so I said perhaps we could jot down some thoughts ready for our next sharing session with the other set.

Matthew came in with: 'Where it says one hundred and twenty-one days in the subway, is it now in the story?' The question, it transpired, came from confusion with Slake's remembering of his time with his aunt, when he was accused of spending the bottle deposit money.

They were all quiet, so I told them their thoughts on 'sight' had helped me with the book. Next, I said I thought ideas about sight were connected with light too, and said it was something to do with a sentence about Slake getting a light into his cave. They sat up to this challenge and almost got the sentence right, saying, 'With that, Slake's cave was lit'. Then I said that if we looked at the two words, darkness and light, did they have anything to do with Slake's character and the conditions of his life? The responses:

James Bro.: 'His cave's dimly lit and so's his life.' I said, 'What a good way of putting it', and asked for more explanation.

Dean: 'It's dull.'

Rebecca and Anouska: 'He's got no proper clothes or food.'

Matthew: 'He's got no proper friends, and dark is a dreary colour, and when it's light it's sort of happy.'

Dean: 'Yeah, the punishment he had.'

Katiana: 'When he's with his aunt he feels dark.'

What is interesting here is that it is older children only who took the lead in thought. My original question must have been too difficult, both in its phrasing and content. Younger, and less mature children (I'm not putting both attributes together) did join in, mostly repeating 'The tunnel's dark', or 'The walls are dark'.

Perhaps unwisely, I went back to the tunnel and underground imagery. When I asked, 'Does the tunnel idea, the being underground, play a big part in the story?', there were pursed lips, heads to the side, and expressions of 'Not really' on their faces. Still worrying the bone, and getting just a little exasperated, I suggested that tunnels, and cold, and no proper bed, and darkness, were not the usual things in our lives. I asked what the tunnel and subway meant to Slake; why did he choose to be there?

'Home', 'Hiding place', 'Safe house', 'He's protected'. The tone of voice these responses were delivered in suggested I really needn't have asked.

Somehow, we got to the word civilized. I had to explain it, then asked whether Slake's life was civilized in the subway. Immediately they came up with:

'Shelter', 'Friend, the cleaning lady', 'Warmth', 'He's got freedom from being hunted', 'Food', 'Cleanliness, because he washed in the clean toilets', 'He's got a job, his business', 'Water', 'He runs his own life' (from Matthew, I remember).

Katy, who had been ruminating on civilization all this time, grinned and said, 'Yes, but he doesn't clean his teeth'.

Wednesday, March 19. Chapter seven, where life gets better and better for Slake, was enjoyed very much. The children smiled and laughed a lot, feeling a sense of relief for Slake, and empathizing easily with his classifying and pleasure in his collections. They loved the 'Good enough' response at the

end, from the turbaned man (Slake's glasses), laughing and repeating it to themselves.

The whole section on Slake's glasses (page fifty-four) was very relevant to their thoughts on sight. I looked up and said it fitted in with our thoughts so far, and that into my head had come the name of a book I was sure they had all heard as infants and probably seen as a film on television. Lots of puzzled expressions, to which I responded with 'Think of glasses, coloured lenses that change how the world looks'. Some more thinking, and then a number of children came up with *The Wizard of Oz*. They talked about their memories of it for a few minutes before I led them back to Slake, asking if there were any connections between the two books. Lots of children said yes, but in the couple of minutes we had left I only got two comments down, and they were to do with sight:

Matthew: 'It's like Dorothy, the longer he stays, the happier he gets, he doesn't want to go.'

Stuart (one of my so-called less able children): 'His aunt is bad like the bad witch in *The Wizard of Oz*.' This last comment raised Stuart's standing in the group enormously, and he basked in the approving murmurs and glances.

Thursday and Friday were the last days of term. Finishing study books, sorting out artwork, checking equipment, cleaning, etc., meant the atmosphere wasn't right for concentrated listening, so the children agreed we should finish *Slake* at the start of next term.

Summer term, Monday, April 7. Their interest had been maintained over the two-week break and we took up from where we left off, first thing this morning.

We came to the part where the lights go out on the platform and the word 'evolution' is in the text. I asked if they knew what it meant. Many were unsure, so I gave a brief explanation and they quickly caught on to the early man aspect, with Stuart then saying, 'The man, a long time ago, lived in caves'. Others agreed and I asked if this had any connection with what we knew of the book. They answered with, 'Yes . . . cavemen . . . old rags . . . no proper food . . . no proper bed . . . drawings like the cavemen . . . scavengers for food'.

Page seventy-seven brought us back to Willis Joe, where

the deterioration in his life, his poor motivation for his job, and his family are described. I simply asked if they had anything to say about this.

Rebecca: 'He's quarrelling with his wife and children.'

Tom: 'The wrong driving.' (One boy added, 'Like a lunatic.')

James Bro.: 'He walks the long way home on purpose.'

After this I asked, 'How would you describe the atmosphere in this bit?' Stuart, whose attention often wanders, was still paying close attention and was again first with a response:

Stuart: 'Tiring.'

Hannah: 'It's like a habit, his life's boring.'

James Bro.: 'He's addicted, like cigarettes.'

Tom: 'Because he's getting fed up with his life, he's getting nearer Australia again, he needs it.'

This last perceptive comment puzzled some children and we had a general talk on how dreams and ambitions, even, and perhaps especially, unfulfilled ones, are important to people.

Tuesday, April 8. We read chapters thirteen and fourteen today. We looked at how little was left to read and the children were excited at the thought of the coming climax to the story.

We discussed the use of the word 'tomb' in connection with Slake's almost self-burial in his cave, when he realizes the workmen are coming to block up the hole [in the tunnel wall]. I wondered if they would be able to make the connection with the Easter story which they had heard so much of before the holidays. They found this either too difficult or simply not relevant to their perception of the book, so I told them it was a connection I personally found interesting and left it at that.

In the final paragraph on page eighty-five, at the end of chapter thirteen, I drew their attention to the word 'tracks', just before Slake stumbles out into the tunnel.

The children were now in a high pitch of excitement, but before we started the next chapter, I asked for some comments:

Peter: 'Slake might die.'

Anthony: 'Their lines have crossed.'

Anouska: 'Slake's angry at the workmen.'

Katiana: 'If he doesn't wake up properly his house will be lost.'

Rebecca: 'I think Willis Joe will help him get his house back.'

Matthew: 'Slake's sort of dying and so's his cave.'

We just had time to read chapter fourteen. The children were delighted that Slake was safe, and also that Willis Joe had mentally made a recovery; as Neil said, 'Willis has stopped being a lunatic.'

Wednesday, April 9. By common consent *Slake* had to be finished first thing this morning. Before we started we talked about how final chapters often bring together threads of the story that have seemed disconnected or puzzling, and that we would watch out for this as we read.

They didn't want to stop anywhere during the reading, and when the book was closed there was an air of disappointment, I felt. I just looked up enquiringly and Anouska said vehemently, 'It's like a film with a stupid ending, you don't know what's happened.' We were all so taken aback by this I feared the children would feel the book had cheated them in a way, and wondered if I could rescue the experience for them. So I said that books have all sorts of endings and that this might be one of the kind that needs the reader to look back into the book to understand the way the ending has worked out.

They brightened up at this and there were two comments that helped them begin to come to terms with the ending:

Matthew: 'Slake wanted to leave the underground like Willis Joe wanted to leave his sheep.'

James Bro.: 'Slake escaped from the tomb and the bird escaped from Slake, it's got ideas of trapped and escaped.'

I concluded by saying that this was a book we would all need to think about and that I would get the tape recorder in so that they could have some conversations in small groups, and gather their ideas together, as well as putting their ideas in writing if they wanted to.

April 15. I now have a student working with me who has started reading *The Way to Sattin Shore* [by Philippa Pearce] to my set. We have finished the tapes and writing on *Slake*.

16 · 'Tell me' Games

Variations on a theme: strategies we think of as readerly games that allow the 'Tell me' approach to be enjoyed in ways that widen its scope and emphasize one aspect or another of its strengths.

THE SENTENCE GAME

The class is divided into small groups of not less than three and not more than five. Each group will have read a different book.

The members of a group begin by sharing the basic four questions. If they want it (or the teacher does), one of them is appointed chairperson and note-maker. When they have finished with the basic questions, they talk about any general and special questions they think appropriate or that the teacher has asked them to address. During this time the teacher tours the groups to keep in touch with what is happening and to help with any problems.

When the teacher judges the time right, the talk is stopped and all group members privately (no discussion allowed) write down the one thing about their book they'd most like to say to someone who hasn't read it. Do not allow very much time for this; it shouldn't be lingered over but written under pressure. Next the group listens to each member's sentence, after which they help each other revise their sentences to express as well as they can what they want to say. And finally they decide in which order they will read their sentences out to the whole class. In other words, they arrange their sentences into a paragraph. Again, this should be done quickly.

Now the class comes together. The teacher nominates a group to start the next part of the game, which should be fairly formally done, the group sat in front of the class, like a panel, the whole business being slightly dramatized so that

everyone senses its importance. The chosen group announces the title and author of their book and shows a copy of it. Then each sentence is read out in the agreed order. The teacher asks who already wants to read this book. After which the rest of the class question the group about their book. The group members must answer, though they can confer, and they have the option of saying that to answer that question would spoil the story. Every now and then the teacher asks who would now like to read the book, and allows the questioning to continue as long as it seems fruitful.

I've found this game to be enormously useful and usually enjoyed. An example: a group of three students read Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*. Their sentences went like this: 'I do not want to tell you anything about this book because it would spoil it. I think it is one of the best books I have ever read. I think you will enjoy it too, but the best way to enjoy it is just to get on and read it before you say anything about it.' My immediate reaction was that this would be the end of their turn. But not at all. There followed a long question-and-answer session as the class tried to probe what the group meant and what had made them feel as they did. Afterwards almost everyone read the book, and came back demanding a full 'Tell me' session about it because they said, having read it, they could see why the group had been so unwilling to talk about it, and now they wanted to know what everyone else thought.

Participants soon learn the questions that get the talk going, like 'Where is the story set?', 'When is it set?', 'Who is the main character and what is she or he like?', 'Is it the sort of book that you can't put down?' They also learn that asking for a passage to be read aloud is helpful; and learn at the same time to rehearse a passage so as to be prepared for this request.

The educational values of this game are obvious: a book has to be read carefully enough to talk about it well; there is small group and large group work based on cooperative talk; a carefully constructed sentence must be written and editorial help exchanged; experience is gained of presenting thoughts, feeling, critical ideas to an audience, and of explaining and defending them; student-stimulated further reading is a possible outcome.

THE NON-READER GAME

Non-readers of a book in any group of readers are usually considered a nuisance. This is a way of making them useful. As they know nothing about the book, they can be given the job of questioner and clarifier. Whenever they aren't sure what the rest of the group is talking about, they must say so and the others must explain. Now and then the teacher asks them to sum up what they think has been said – and this may make the others think again about what they want to say and then express themselves more carefully and with greater subtlety.

The presence of non-readers needn't be left to chance. When selecting a book for a 'Tell me' session, a couple of people in the class can be asked not to read it and to be ready to play the part of the non-reader during the discussion. They add a little ginger to the mix.

THE RESPONSIBILITY GAME

'Make it real' should, it seems to me, be a guiding principle in all educational activity. Thus, mathematics is better learned by doing something with it that has an actual, everyday purpose than by performing exercises just to show you can do them. One of the great things about reading literature is that reading is its own 'real purpose'. You read literature for its own sake – to enjoy doing it, for the interest of the text itself, and for what may be learned from it.

Nevertheless, there are related activities involving interpretive and discriminatory procedures that, for children especially, develop their understanding of what reading means, what it is 'good for', and why they do it. The most important of these is taking responsibility for someone else's reading. There are numerous ways of doing this, but the best involve plenty of critical talk among the participants. Here are some examples, longer descriptions of which are included in *The Reading Environment*.

1. Older pupils take a selection of books to younger pupils, books which they have read and discussed and think the younger ones will enjoy. And what will they do? Read aloud? In that case practice is necessary so that they can do it well. What will they say? What questions will they ask the

younger ones, and which not, and why? All this needs discussion and preparation. In doing this the older pupils reflect on themselves, learn (and relearn) what kind of readers they were and are now, and make critical judgements about the value of individual books.

2. 'Have you read this?' sessions for their own class, other classes, parent groups, whoever. This again means preparing a book carefully, thinking out what you want to say about it and why it is worthwhile choosing it and encouraging others to read it. And preparing passages to read aloud.

3. Written reviews, author biographies, and other kinds of response (illustrations, cover designs, paintings of scenes, etc.) for 'publication' on display boards, school magazines, etc.

4. Anthology programmes rehearsed and presented to the whole school or to class gatherings can be extremely valuable. One of the best I've heard of involved a class of ten- and eleven-year-olds who had been enjoying the poetry of Charles Causley. They noticed that his poems can be grouped into periods of his life – his childhood, his time in the navy, his work as a teacher, and so on. They selected about ten of his poems, arranged them according to the periods of his life, wrote a linking narrative commentary, and then, after a great deal of rehearsal and editing of their script, presented this as a performance to the whole school in a programme called *Charles Causley in his Poetry*. Afterwards, the written version was bound into a book and added to the school library.

THE WORD-ASSOCIATION GAME

All literature is made of language. Anything that highlights this is useful. A simple way of getting it going is to play the word-association game with, say, a book's title. For example, ten-year-olds, not to mention some adults, often find Ted Hughes's poem 'I See a Bear' a little difficult to understand. They don't know how to read it. The word-association game helps if you take each word of the first line, 'I see a bear', and look for puns and possible meanings: *bear*, meaning an

animal, and a punning homonym for *bare*, meaning naked, is a clue to the meaning of the poem as a whole; as is *I*, meaning me, and *eye* being the part of the body you see with; while *see*, meaning to look and to perceive, to understand, is at the heart of it too.

Always in reading it is a matter of finding patterns, of looking for connections, of keeping the mind open to possibilities.

THE QUESTIONS GAME

Doug Hilker, of the English Department at Runnymeade Collegiate Institute in Canada, suggests a 'game' that particularly suits 'Tell me' discussions of poetry, but that works too with other kinds of text, especially stories and novels.

> Each student reads the poem and writes down three questions about it that he or she would like answered. Then students select a partner, try to answer each other's questions and arrive at three questions about the poem they still would like more ideas about. In the next step, two sets of partners join together in a group of four, and answer each other's questions. They settle on *one* question they will present for full class discussion . . .
>
> The beauty of the approach is the level of involvement by the students. They're all interested – after all, they are discussing their own questions. They all play the role of questioner and answerer. In many ways, I felt the classes went further and deeper than if I had asked all the questions. (Frank McTeague, *Shared Reading in the Middle and High School Years*, page 52)

Hilker's conclusion, that all the students were interested and their talk went further and deeper because they were asking and answering their own questions, is at the heart of the 'Tell me' approach. 'Tell me' succeeds because it foregrounds the importance of the reader's experience of reading a text and sharing the experience of other 'similarly qualified readers' (Wayne Booth's phrase).

Endnote

I have resisted the temptation to end this book with a rhetorical flourish, because the 'Tell me' approach continues to develop as more and more teachers take it up. There is no completion: it simply goes on evolving.

A great many people have contributed to 'Tell me', which began twelve years ago in meetings with the study group mentioned in early chapters: Irene Suter, Barbara Raven, Jan Maxwell, Anna Collins and Steve Bicknell. Where records of the work of others have been quoted, their names are gratefully acknowledged at that point.

Lissa Paul and Mary Sutcliffe commented in detail on drafts of this expanded version of the original 'Tell me' sketch that first appeared in *Booktalk*.

As always, Margaret Clark has given unstinting editorial help.

My thanks to them all.

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Tell Me is a companion to *The Reading Environment* (PETA/Thimble 1992). Aidan Chambers' earlier book shows how to make schools and classrooms places where children *want* to read. This one is concerned with getting groups of children to talk openly and confidently about their readings of particular books. Using a generous selection of transcripts of classroom discussions, it shows how children can be encouraged to share their enthusiasms and difficulties, and the connections they've discovered within and beyond the text, and thereby arrive at understandings which none of them could have managed on their own. It demonstrates convincingly that children 'can be critics' — and surprisingly sophisticated critics at that.

Aidan Chambers explains the processes and outlines the ground rules developed by practitioners of the 'Tell me' approach over several years. From their experience he has formulated a Framework, 'a repertoire of questions that assist readers in speaking out their reading', which forms the substance of one of the sixteen chapters included here.

Aidan Chambers writes novels for young people and is a visiting lecturer at Westminster College, Oxford. With Nancy Chambers he founded The Thimble Press in 1969.

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ISBN 1-875622-09-8

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